A myth is a true story,
which took place in the beginning.
, Mircea Eliade

In the old days of King Arthur,
Of whom the Britons speak with great honour,
This whole land was filled with fairy-tale magic...

Chaucer

HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM, REXQUE FUTURUS

Inscription on King Arthur's tomb according to Sir Thomas Malory, a good knight of Newbold Revell in the county of Warwickshire

Few myths have enjoyed as great a following as the tale of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. This legend, which originated in the 6th–7th centuries in the British Isles – at that time almost the Ultima Thule of Europe – struck the bell of European and world culture with tremendous force and caused such a resonance that the bell continues to ring to this day – nearly 1,400 years later. There are people who cannot remember the name of Zeus's father – yet few would be found who do not know who Uther Pendragon was to Arthur. There are people who have no idea who Joshua, Gideon, Elijah or Jeremiah were – but everyone knows who Merlin was. There are those who are not quite sure what the story was about Lazarus of Bethany or what exactly happened at the wedding feast at Cana – but everyone will faithfully recount the tale of the sword drawn from the stone or the anvil.

There are those who do not know what the connection was between Aeneas and the Queen of Carthage, and the fact that this queen was called Dido will come as a surprise to many. Few, however, would fail to associate Guinevere with Lancelot, and I believe that absolutely no one would hesitate when asked to name Tristan's beloved. Ask anyone what the lake was called where the fisherman Simon used to cast his nets,

also known as Peter, and then ask him to name King Arthur's castle. And who remembers the name of Siegfried *of the Nibelungs'* sword, or the weapon of Roland, Charlemagne's paladin? As for the name Excalibur, I guarantee that everyone will recall it and recognise it at once.

So what is it that has ensured that, after fourteen centuries, the history and adventures of the ruler of distant Britain and his valiant knights remain so close to our hearts and so well known to us? Why are Arthur, Merlin, Lancelot and Tristan closer to us and better known than Judas Maccabeus, Achilles, Aeneas, Orlando or… King Popiel or Walgierz Wdały? Why has the myth of King Arthur found its way into the hearts and imaginations of millions in such an unprecedented and unique way? Why has this legend become a treasure trove of literary motifs at least as rich and frequently drawn upon as – and how much closer to us – Greek mythology, *the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid**? It was not only the Anglo-Saxons who drew heavily on the myth of Arthur and his knights: Chaucer, Drayton, Warton, Holingshed, Spenser, Milton, Shakespeare, Dryden, Jonson, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Rossetti, Morris, Tennyson, Yeats, Swinburne, Eliot, Scott, Longfellow, Lowell, Twain, Joyce and C.S. Lewis, but also Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, Petrarch and Dante. Brantôme and Cervantes. Calderón. Goethe, Schiller and Uhland. And also Sigrid Undset. Jean Cocteau. John Steinbeck. Italo Calvino. Umberto Eco. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka. Maria Kuncewiczowa. And Teodor Parnicki… It is impossible to name them all.

Why Arthur, why his legend?

The answer to these questions can be found in numerous literary and academic works. The text below makes no pretence whatsoever to being an academic treatise, as its author was not, is not, and does not intend to be a scholar*.

* My modesty stems partly from sheer fear – I remember what befell the 'famous historian' who tried to show off his knowledge of the Arthurian myth in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

However, since the bell struck by the Arthurian legend rings out particularly loudly beneath the vaulted ceiling (or is it a colossal edifice?) of contemporary *fantasy* literature, let a *fantasy* author be permitted to chat about King Arthur. Which is what the undersigned is and intends to remain.

Let us begin with a fundamental question – did King Arthur even exist? Perhaps this is not such a fundamental question after all – for whichever of the possible answers, be it positive or negative, will have no bearing whatsoever on the form and significance of the legend. Nevertheless, the very attempt to answer it may help us to understand the myth. Its origins. And its significance.

History and legend

The islands – which we now call the British Isles – were exceptionally fortunate when it came to their inhabitants. They were invaded time and time again, since time immemorial. Once an invader had defeated the indigenous population, they themselves quickly became the 'natives', only to be defeated and conquered moments later by someone else, who in turn became the 'natives', and so on, round and round. As a result, it is impossible to say for certain who was the 'true native' there. That is to say, it would remain a mystery were it not for the legends and tales. But since we do have these legends and tales, we know that the original and first inhabitant of the British Isles was the giant Albion, son of Poseidon. It was from him that the island took its earliest name.

But soon the first invader appeared. It was Heracles, who, after numerous exploits in southern Europe, wished to make a name for himself amongst the Hyperboreans as well. Having crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and erected two pillars there, the hero soon reached the White Cliffs of Dover. Inhospitable Albion lunged at him with a roar, and Heracles struck him on the crown of the head with his famous club. And then he went home.

It is worth noting that he was the only conqueror of the Isle of Albion to have done so. All his successors either remained there for ever or were driven out by force.

According to legend, the next colonisers were the descendants of Noah. Japheth, Noah's son, had a son named Histion, who in turn fathered four sons: Frankus, Romanus, Alemanus and Britto. Each of them settled in a particular corner of Europe and gave rise to a corresponding people. Britto, as we surmise, settled on the Isle of Albion, separated from his brother Frankus by a strait later named the English Channel.

The legend does not specify which regions of Europe were settled by the other descendants of Noah's sons. I, however, have certain theories regarding the territories chosen by the descendants of Ham.

The English poet John Milton, drawing on Geoffrey of Monmouth (of whom more will be said later), refutes the versions given above. According to Milton (and Geoffrey), the situation was as follows:

After the fall of Troy, a handful of Trojans survived the massacre, led by Aeneas. Virgil described Aeneas's fate. It is widely known and we shall not repeat it here; we shall confine ourselves to stating another well-known fact: Aeneas finally settled in Italy and founded the Roman people. He had a son, Ascanius, known as Iulus. Ascanius, in turn, had a son named Silvius, and Silvius's son was a certain Brutus. This same Brutus had the misfortune of accidentally killing his father whilst hunting, for which he was banished from Italy. The exile travelled to Greece, where he encountered another enclave of Trojans who had fled the ruined city of Ilion. They were faring badly; the Greeks oppressed them, mistreated them and made their lives difficult in every possible way. Brutus rallied his countrymen and cited the example of his great-grandfather Aeneas. 'Let us set sail,' he urged the Trojans, 'and seek out a patch of land of our own. What's this, is there only one Italy in the world? Aeneas succeeded – are we any worse than him? I tell you, lads, we shall find ourselves a new homeland, and if we're lucky, we might even come across some Sabines – it'll be a merry affair.'

The Trojans heeded his words and set off. They sailed for a long time, initially to no avail. Fortunately, at just the right moment, the goddess Diana appeared to Brutus and instructed them to sail north of the Gallic shores, to the lands where the giants dwell. For it is there that New Troy shall be founded.

just in time, the goddess Diana appeared to him and instructed him to sail north of the Gallic shores, to the lands where the giants dwell. For it is there that New Troy shall be built.

The goddess was not joking. Keeping to the indicated course, the Trojans soon sighted the White Cliffs and landed in the place now known as Devonshire. It turned out that the goddess had not exaggerated about the giants either – indeed, in Albion there were as many of those brutes as there were ants. 'Bloody hell,' swore Brutus, 'my great-grandfather had it easier! The Rutuli were smaller!'

Without much deliberation, Brutus's lads named the newly discovered land – in honour of their leader – Britannia, after which they set about the giants and gave them a proper thrashing. Punitive expeditions were even undertaken – one of Brutus's companions, Coryneus, set out far to the west, defeated and killed the giant Gogmagog who was rampaging there, and settled in the conquered lands; and from his name, the land was named Cornovia – Cornwall.

Brutus, for his part, built a stronghold which he named Troianova. Over time, this name evolved into Trinovantum, and today it is known as London.

Brutus's sons were Lokrynus, Albanaktus and Kamberus. After their father's death, they divided the territory among themselves. Lokrynus chose the central part, which is present-day England. This land would come to be known by the name of its ruler, Logres or Logrus. Kamberus took the western part (Wales and Cumbreland), a land called Cambria or Kymria*.

Brutus's third son, Albanaktus, was allotted the North – Caledonia, that is, present-day Scotland. This country was named Albania.

As we can see, everything would therefore be clear and simple were it not for the fact that nobody wants to believe in myths and legends. On the other hand, everyone believes anthropologists and archaeologists. Let us therefore now hear what the scholars have to say about the original inhabitants of the British Isles.

* This is precisely where Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Cimmerian* originates. The name Conan (meaning 'the Great') is borne by many legendary Welsh (Cymric) heroes. The official name of Wales today is Cymru.

The oldest identified inhabitants of the British Isles belonged to the same group as the Greek Pelasgians and the Italian Etruscans. Anglo-Saxon historians refer to this mysterious people as the Iberians, as they are believed to have come from the Iberian Peninsula. Where they came from before reaching the Iberian Peninsula, when they landed in the British Isles, and whether they encountered and conquered any indigenous, ancient race there – remains unknown*.

The Iberians left few traces of their presence in the British Isles (unless, of course, one counts Stonehenge and New Grange), from which it is inferred that they did not develop in the same way as the Etruscans, but remained at a rather primitive stage of civilisational development until their arrival in the British Isles (around the 6th century BC) The Gauls – the ethnic group that will be of particular interest to us.

The Celts travelled a long way – this people originally probably inhabited regions at the foot of the Alps, along the Upper Rhine and the Danube. From there, the Celts undertook a long, expansive march. Some of them (the Boii tribes) settled in Bohemia and Moravia, and also entered what is now Poland for a time. Others, however, settled in Gaul, which, as Caesar explains in his **Commentaries on the Gallic War**, is divided into three parts (*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*). These *partes tres* are regions inhabited by tribes speaking different languages and differing in their customs. Caesar refers to them as the Aquitani, the Belgae and the Celts, sometimes using the name Gauls for the latter group.

It was precisely these Gallic tribes (with the exception of the Aquitani, who did not have Celtic origins) that carried out successive invasions of the British Isles. The first to set out for Britain (6th century BC) were the tribes

* Quite recently, a Bulgarian philologist, on the basis of research into the Hittite and Etruscan languages, proved that these languages derive from a common stock. The Etruscans, the Bulgarian scholar goes on to argue, were a people who arrived in Italy from Asia Minor. To be precise, they were none other than the Trojans of Homer and Virgil. And if the Etruscans and the British Iberians are related, then the legend of Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas, unexpectedly reveals a deeper meaning.

known as the Goidels. They settled in what is now Ireland and the Isle of Man, as well as in Britain as far as Cumbria, Cornwall, Devon and North Wales, initially decimating the indigenous peoples and driving them from the fertile lands, but later allying and integrating with them in the face of a common enemy: the new invaders, who were (in the 4th century BC) their Celtic allies, the tribes of*the Belgae*, inhabiting the Meuse river basin*.

However, part of Britain's indigenous population (these supposed Iberians) survived; they did not integrate with the Gallic Celts and refused to be conquered. These were the tribes inhabiting the wild, inaccessible highlands and mountains in the north of the island – Albania, or what is now Scotland. As we shall see later, these northern tribes defended themselves against the foreign onslaught very effectively and for a very long time.

In the south, however, everything unfolded in line with the stereotype: invasion, battle, conquest, integration. The Belgae quickly brought the entire south-eastern lowlands under their control, and eventually reached the foothills of the Grampians, as far as the River Tweed. The Goidelic Celts held on firmly to Ireland and the Isle of Man, whilst their enclaves persisted in Cornwall and Wales. Their shared Celtic roots facilitated integration and understanding in the border regions. Over time, the Belgae, having intermingled with the Goidels, split into groups and tribal confederations – Celtic, but now British. The Romans would later name one such group the Brigantes**. And it was from these Brigantes (and not from the mythical Britto or Brutus) that soon

* The two-stage Celtic invasion of the British Isles is evidenced by the fact that, to this day, the Celtic languages are divided into two distinct groups: the Goidelic languages (the languages of the tribes of the first invasion, namely modern Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx) and the Brittonic languages (the language of the tribes of the second invasion: modern Welsh, Cornish and Breton, which is derived from them).

** The other major British tribes were known (from Latin) as: the Carveti, Votadini, Deceangli, Coritani, Dobunni, Catuvellauni, Trinovantes, Durotriges, Atrebates, Cantiaci, Silures, Ordovices, Iceni, Demetae, Parisi and Dumnonii. The historical King Arthur is believed to have come from the Silures tribe, who inhabited southern Wales.

the entire population of the island will be known as the Britons, and the island itself as Britain. The Romans, meanwhile, will be the godfathers. Well, they are, after all, the descendants of Aeneas.

The Romans took an interest in the Island even before the birth of Christ. In 55–54 BC, Julius Caesar set out against the Britons. He carried out (I quote Robert Graves here, not historians, for I am, after all, a writer, not a historian) two invasions. During the first, the Britons, led by King Cassiwellun (Caswal-lawna), put up such fierce resistance that Caesar managed to advance inland by a mere ten miles. On the second occasion, having reinforced his forces to twenty thousand soldiers, he broke through the defences and took control of Centia, now known as Kent. The campaign ended with the islanders being forced to pay an annual tribute, which, incidentally, they stopped paying just two years later.

During the reigns of Caesar Augustus, Tiberius and Caligula (c. 30 BC–40 AD), Rome took no interest in Britain and made no demands for tribute, aware that this would in practice mean a war of conquest, the cost of which was deemed too high in comparison with the expected gains. A strategy of commercial penetration was therefore pursued towards the island.

In south-east Britain, Cymbelin (Cunobelinus), King of the Trinovantes, soon came to power. Cymbelin's sons, who apparently did not get on very well with their father, began to flee to Rome and ask for military aid, promising in return to recognise the Empire's sovereignty... and regular tribute. Caligula was unexpectedly taken with the idea. 'I shall conquer,' he cried eagerly, 'Britain from the Isles of Scilly to the Orkneys!' And with that, he set off. Having landed with his army at Boulogne, he ordered the legionaries to hack at the sea with their swords and gather shells, which he regarded as a victory over Neptune and a tribute from Britain. That was the end of the 'intervention'. Caligula returned to Rome, where Cassius Cherea was already sharpening his dagger....

Cymbelin died in the same year that Cassius Cherea's dagger reached Caligula (41 AD). After the king's death, his family turned on one another in a struggle for power. One of Cymbelin's sons, Karaktak (Caradawg),

proclaimed himself king of the Trinovantes. The second son, Beryk (Verica), in keeping with family tradition, fled to Rome and appealed to Claudius for help in the fight against his brother.

Claudius prepared his campaign with precision and meticulous care. He studied Julius Caesar's memoirs and skilfully assembled an expeditionary force. In the year 43, with a force of forty thousand soldiers, he crossed the Caletan Strait and attacked the Britons, marching straight towards Caractacus's capital, Colchester. Caractacus and his son-in-law Kattigern blocked the Romans' path at Brentwood, but were routed in battle. Claudius declared the conquered part of the island (the Southern Lowlands – Kent, Sussex and Essex) a Roman province. He left a contingent there under the command of Ostorius, whilst he himself – following the example of the Caesars – organised a triumphal entry into Rome.

But as early as 45, Caractacus rallied his forces once more and attacked the Roman garrisons. He was initially successful, but was soon captured through treachery and handed over to the Romans by his own people. Brought to Rome and presented before Claudius in chains, he delivers his own defence speech in astonishingly fluent Latin, so eloquently that the moved emperor spares his life. Having toured and explored Rome, Karaktak utters his famous words: 'I cannot understand how the rulers of such a magnificent city can, deep in their hearts, covet our wretched island huts'.

Poor Karaktak. He did not realise that Rome could never have enough of what the conquered island had to offer: gold, silver, iron, tin, lead, hides, grain, cattle and slaves. The Romans did not abandon their plans to conquer Britain; further legions crossed the Channel. By the year 47, Britain was occupied as far as the rivers Severn and Trent.

The Britons did not surrender easily. The courage and ferocity with which they defended their lands filled the Romans with admiration. Although *the Pax Romana* soon became a fait accompli in Britain, the Celts and Britons did not lay down their arms. Between 60 and 69 AD, when almost the entire island had already been conquered, they rose up in armed rebellion against the invaders under the leadership of the warlike Boudikka (Boadicea), Queen of the Iceni. Boudikka fought valiantly. She routed several legions, inflicting heavy losses—

seventy thousand Romans and their supporters. She ordered the captured legionaries to be impaled on sharpened stakes, which quite effectively undermined the enemy's morale.

However, the resistance was in vain – the uprising was brutally suppressed. Boudica refused to suffer the same disgrace that had befallen Caractacus – she took her own life. Her statue stands today in the city she razed to the ground during the revolt – in London, by Westminster Bridge.

Shortly afterwards, in the year 78, the Roman commander Gnaeus Julius Agricola completed the conquest by defeating the last remaining British defenders at Mons Graupius in Caledonia*. From that date onwards, the Romans' full and undivided rule over the island became a reality. *Britannia* became another province of the Empire.

But take note – the Far North once again successfully resisted the aggressors; once again, it refused to be conquered! The wild backwoods of Caed Celyddon, the inaccessible highlands and gorges of Caledonia, and the passes of the Grampians, valiantly defended by fierce mountain tribes, once again proved an impassable barrier. Just as the Celts had done in the past, so now the disciplined Roman legions, whose eagles had flown victoriously halfway across the world, were forced to yield to the ferocity and courage of the natives. The highlanders of the North went into battle decked out in their war paint, so the Romans began to call them *Picti* (the Painted Ones). The cohorts were forced to retreat; the North remained free, and the valiant 'Painted Ones' did not confine themselves to defence. They launched their own attacks and fought back so effectively that the Romans were eventually forced to cordon themselves off from them. As was their custom, they built two successive limes – defensive border walls marking the boundaries of Roman territory – designed to keep the Picts in check and prevent their raiding expeditions. Between 122 and 127, Hadrian's Wall (*Vallum Hadriani*, cutting across the northern part of the island along a line running between the present-day cities of Carlisle and Newcastle) was built, and between 140 and 142, Antonine's Wall (*Vallum Antonini*, near present-day Edinburgh). To the north of the Walls lay the Picts; to the south, *the Pax Romana*.

* This battle (based on Tacitus' account) is vividly described by Marion Zimmer Bradley in her book **The Forest House* *.

Britain in Roman times (c. AD 400)

CALEDONIA
DAL RIADA
LOUDONESIA
MARE FRESICUM
DEIRA
DEMKTIA
VENEDOTIA
MOR HAFREN
DUMNONIA
CORNOVIA
SCILLY
KENT
SUSSEX
Antonine Wall
Hadrian's Wall
Luguvalium
Corstopitum
Segedunum
BERNICIA
Eburacum
Manau
Mons
Deva
Lindum
Viroconium
Ratae
Coritanorum
Camulodunum
Maridunum
Isca
Glevum
Corinium
Aquae Sulis
Sarum
Venta Belgarum
Vecta Insula
Isca Dumnoniorum
Londinium
Thunet
Dubris

As in all Roman provinces, however, *the Pax Romana* did not mean occupation, terror and exploitation, but above all development and progress: civilisational, economic and cultural. Britain was divided into four provinces: *Maxima Caesarensis*, *Flavia Caesarensis*, *Britannia Prima* and *Britannia Secunda*, whose capitals were Londinium (London), Lindum (Lincoln), Corinium (Cirencester) and Eburacum (York). Each province was administered by a vice-prefect, whilst the whole was under the authority of a prefect, or governor. Military authority lay in the hands of two military commanders (praetors) – one bore the title *Dux Britanniarum*, was based in Eburacum and was responsible for the northern forts of the limes. The other, *the Comes Littoris Saxonici*, was responsible for the security of the coast (from Portsmouth to the Wash), which was vulnerable to raids by the Saxons and Normans.

On the sites of former Celtic *caers*, or strongholds, further Roman towns, forts and fortified camps were established: Camulodunum (Colchester, the former capital of Cymbeline and Caractacus), Dubris (Dover), Venta Belgarum (Winchester), Isca (Caerleon on the Usk), Isca Dumnoniorum (Exeter), Glevum (Gloucester), Aquae Sulis (Bath), Corstopitum (Corbridge), Deva (Chester), Segontium (Caernarfon), Venta (Caerwent), Luguvalium (Carlisle) and many, many others.

The Romans remained in Britain for 400 years. A very long time. But eventually they had to leave. The reason was simple – for centuries they had invaded and colonised other peoples and lands; for hundreds of years they had brought *the Pax Romana* to other nations and imposed it by force. Then it so happened that, suddenly, someone knocked on their own door with the hilt of a sword. The Visigoths were already approaching the walls *of Roma Aeterna*, the Eternal City.

The exodus of the Romans from Britain did not happen overnight. The Romans withdrew gradually. And although the last Roman legion left the island in the year 407, a great many Romans remained in Britain: legionaries who owned land here, grants awarded for good service, those who had integrated with the Britons through marriage, and merchants. The assimilated

representatives of the Roman aristocracy, linked by marriage to the native Celtic aristocracy, formed the nucleus of a new ruling class – the British aristocracy, a nobility which, ever since the time of Caractacus, had been equally fluent in Latin and the Celtic language.

But there were also those who welcomed the invaders' retreat with joy. For pockets of anti-Roman resistance had smouldered in Britain throughout the full 400 years of occupation. Clan leaders, following the example of the aforementioned Boudica, regularly instigated revolts and uprisings. Although the legions were stationed as far as Hadrian's Wall, right under the nose *of the Dux Britanniarum, in the mountainous regions of Wales – Dyfed and Gwynedd, Yr Widdfa,* Rheged and Cornwall – Roman authority was, in practice, non-existent; here, the clans and druids still reigned supreme. And once the Romans were gone, the clans immediately turned on one another. A long and fierce struggle for power and dominance began.

The absence of the Roman legions and the ensuing chaos did not go unnoticed by their neighbours. The sails of Irish pirates, then known as the Scots (*Scoti*), appeared off the western coasts. From the north, meanwhile, the indomitable Picts broke through the Walls of Antoninus and Hadrian – abandoned by the Romans – and swept southwards...

Pro-Roman factions appealed to the Empire for help on several occasions – only to be told that the Empire had no interest in the Province of Britannia. Britannia was self-governing and independent, and should therefore resolve its own problems. Help from Rome would not come. Rome had other, more pressing matters on its hands.

These more pressing matters were, as one might easily guess, Alaric's Goths, who were ravaging the city. These were the final gasps of the Empire, which until recently had ruled half the world. In the year 476, the Western Roman Empire fell and never rose again.

But let us return to Britain. Amidst the war of clans and factions, a figure emerges here (around 441–442) who is half-legendary, half-historical. A warrior, a clan chieftain, a sort of *capo di tutti capi*, who presumably seized power by slaughtering or subjugating other pretenders—

His name was Vortigern. Undoubtedly a Briton (one need only note the similarity of the name to Kattigern, Karaktak's son-in-law), but reportedly married to a pure-blooded Roman woman—an aristocrat of the Caesarian line—Vortigern achieved one success after another. He unites the Roman and British factions, wins significant victories against the Irish, and for a time drives the Picts, who were ravaging the North, back beyond Hadrian's Wall. Truly, a providential leader for whom Britain had long yearned. Vortigern restores order. Vortigern rules Britain.

And Vortigern loses Britain – the Britain of the Britons. With consequences – as history will show – that are permanent. Vortigern becomes the British Konrad of Mazovia – or rather, it is Konrad of Mazovia who has learnt nothing from Vortigern's history.

Vortigern knows that the Picts cannot be held at bay for long behind the Roman Walls, for there are no longer any legions stationed there. A whip is needed to drive back the Picts. And Vortigern finds just such a whip. Around the year 443, allies arrive on the island – valiant warriors who will fight for Britain and for Vortigern, who will show the Picts their place. These are Germanic tribes – the Angles, Jutes, Frisians and Saxons. Soon, this motley crew would come to be known collectively as the Saxons[3]. At their head stood Hengist and Horsa, and their banner – the White Horse – flew above them.

* The Jutes, as the name suggests, inhabited the Jutland Peninsula, whilst the Frisians inhabited Frisia. The Anglo-Saxon tribes were based in the region of present-day Schleswig-Holstein. The Saxons inhabited the North Sea coast from the River Ems to the mouth of the Elbe, that is, the northern part of today's Bundesland of Lower Saxony (Hamburg, Bremen). What we associate today with Saxony (and Saxon porcelain) – namely the areas around Magdeburg, Leipzig and Meissen – is a much later construct, not geographical but political: the lands taken from the Elbe Slavs were christened 'Saxony' – how patriotic and Germanic of them.

There is a theory that the ancient tribal name of the Saxons derives from the short, single-edged swords they used, known as *'sax'* or *'saex'*. Although the reverse may be true.

The alliance is cemented by Vortigern's marriage (did he poison the Roman woman?) to Hengist's daughter. The Saxons are granted the right to settle on the island of Thanet and in the coastal part of Kent. Furthermore, they are promised ownership of all the territory they can wrest from the Picts – everything north of Hadrian's Wall will belong to them. The Saxons set to work with gusto and indeed deal the Picts a heavy blow. They do not confine themselves to defending the Roman limes – they land on the Orkney Islands and from there attack the Picts' rear in the far north. And new ships continue to sail to Britain, carrying fresh warriors... and hundreds of new settlers. The settlers look around. The lands north of the Wall, in wild Caledonia? But why look so far afield? There is plenty of beautiful and fertile land here in Britain, in Kent and Sussex; you can take it as soon as you land. This is a rich country, not like our barren Jutland, stony Frisia or the marshy Elbe estuary. There is an abundance of everything here. And if anything runs out, well, we can easily take it from those stupid, sluggish Britons, those pseudo-Romans! The Picts have been doing this for centuries and are still alive; we shall follow the Picts' example!

Celtic clan strongholds and Roman villas go up in smoke. The Saxons press forward, the Britons retreat in panic. They already know they've brought enemies down upon their heads, beside whom the painted Picts seem like gentle lambs. A desperate Vortigern tries to strike deals, deciding to come to terms with the Saxons, to draw up borders and demarcation lines. A hundred British chieftains meet at a peace conference with a hundred of Hengist's thanes. All – as a sign of peace and friendship – arrive unarmed. The beer is flowing, and pigs and rams sizzle on the spits. Let us rejoice! Long live friendship between nations!

And where is this celebration taking place? On Salisbury Plain. In the stone circle of Stonehenge, known as the Dance of the Giants.

At a signal from Hengist, daggers—hitherto cleverly concealed in the boots of the Saxon thanes—flash into view. Before Vortigern's eyes, wide with horror, a terrible massacre unfolds, one that will go down in history as the Night of Long—

Knives. The First Night of the Long Knives – humanity, ever fond of setting a good example, would treat itself to several more such nights later on.

Vortigern miraculously escapes with his life and flees to hide in the Cambrian Mountains. This marks the end of his political career. And – it seems – the end of Celtic Britain. Gone are the pretences of friendship and alliance! This is simply yet another invasion. Soon, the entire eastern part of the Island is in the hands of the Saxons. Britain begins to shrink to the size of Somerset, Devon, Wales and Cornwall. Wotan and the White Horse rule over the rest of the country.

But then another providential figure appears. The last true Roman (though probably a Briton, like Vortigern), who goes down in the chronicles as Ambrosius Aurelianus. And bearing the title *Dux Bellorum*. Having defeated and removed Vortigern (presumably with a rather brutal slash across the throat), Ambrosius drives the Saxons back to the east, rebuilds and strengthens the forts abandoned by the Romans, and fortifies the British clan strongholds in the Roman manner. He rebuilt the road network, significantly bolstered the country's economy and trade with the continent. But the Saxons, though unable to capture the fortified towns and strongholds, continued to ravage the country ceaselessly and with virtual impunity through their plundering raids. There was still no way to deal with the Saxons.

And this is where the legend begins.

The ageing Ambrosius Aurelianus, *Dux Bellorum*, appoints his successor from among the clan leaders. Uther Pendragon is chosen, but not everyone accepts this decision. Gorlois of Cornwall, lord of Tintagel Castle, openly renounces his allegiance to Uther. Some claim, however, that the enmity between Uther and Gorlois stems not solely from political rivalry. Uther's gaze lingered a little too long on the beautiful Igerne, Gorlois's wife. The war that is about to begin is a war over a woman...

Uther's adviser is the wise and powerful sorcerer (druid) Merlin. Through Merlin's magic, Pendragon, consumed by lust, takes on the form of Gorlois – no one, not even Iger-

– fails to recognise the disguise when Uther enters Tintagel Castle. Igerna does not recognise him even in their marital bed.

Uther wins both the woman and power, defeating the clans that had conspired against him. Gorlois is killed in battle, whilst the others pay homage to the victorious chieftain. Pendragon becomes *the* new *Dux Bellorum* and marries Igerna. Igerna gives birth to a son – the fruit of that night at Tintagel. At that moment, however, the sorcerer Merlin appears and reminds Uther that the magical disguise, thanks to which the Dux was once able to take Igerna, came at a price – the child conceived that night is to belong to Merlin...

Merlin entrusts little Arthur – for that is the name of Pendragon and Igerna's son – to the care of the knight Ectorius. The boy is brought up alongside Ectorius's son, Kai. Years pass. Uther Pendragon, *Dux Bellorum* and *Comes Britannorum*, dies – reportedly having choked to death on chicken bones. Who will now rule Britain? Who will carry on the work of Ambrosius and Uther, who will hold back the Picts and the Saxons?

On Imbolc, the festival marking the end of winter, the clan leaders gather in Londinium, at a spot where a huge boulder stands. A steel anvil is embedded in the boulder, and a sword is stuck in it. The inscription proclaims that whoever manages to draw the blade from the anvil and the boulder is the rightful ruler of the Britons. Right then, lads, let's get to it – who's going to pull it out? Some don't even try – perhaps because they can't read – who knows what's really written on that boulder? Others, confident in the strength of their shoulders and arms, give it a go. *Phew… Shit… Next, please.*

Many strong men try, but none succeed. But then fifteen-year-old Arthur, a pupil of the knight Ectorius, grasps the hilt of the sword. And the sword of prophecy, drawn from the stone, glints in his hand! "Look, Britons," cries Merlin, "behold the rightful heir of Uther Pendragon! Behold your king! King Arthur!"

The prophecy, fulfilled before the eyes of all the British clans, sends shockwaves through the land – everyone who is alive rushes to serve under the command of the young ruler. The army that is forming,

strikes at the Saxons. Arthur fights eleven victorious battles against the descendants of Hengist and Horsa. Eleven times he crushes them and routs them, for the backbone of his army is the cavalry, an unstoppable mounted band of young warriors. And the Saxons, though their emblem is the White Horse, fight in an outdated manner – on foot. And they lose.

The twelfth and decisive battle, fought on the fields beneath Badon Hill, ends in a terrible rout of the Saxons – the moral and military strength of the Teutonic invaders is utterly shattered. Albion, Britain, the Land of Logres, can be reborn; freed from the threat of invasions, the country has many years of peace and prosperity ahead of it under the wise and just rule of Arthur, supported by his mounted knights, who sit with him at Camelot Castle, at the Round Table...

A legend?

We shall return to the fact of Arthur's existence, *Dux Bellorum*, as recorded in numerous written accounts – and there were plenty of such sources. Scholars studying the Arthurian myth – and there were countless numbers of them too – have, however, drawn attention to other facts, arising from simple logic, which confirm the historical authenticity of this figure. The Saxons' expansion between 443 and 505 progressed vigorously and at an astonishingly rapid pace. And between 505 and 516, it suddenly came to a halt, grinding to a standstill. Something had happened. A historical event took place which pacified the Saxons for long enough for them to transform from marauders and invaders into settlers, peacefully cultivating the land in the eastern part of the island. Settlers who finally integrated and merged with the descendants of the Britons to give rise to the Anglo-Saxon people – who, in turn, were themselves soon conquered by the Normans from Normandy, led by William the Conqueror. And what sort of event is capable of turning warlike raiders into peaceful citizens? A thorough thrashing, of course, meted out to the raiders. So someone undoubtedly gave the Saxons a thrashing; someone broke their spirit for many years to come. This fact is confirmed by archaeology. During those long years (505–550), there is no trace of typical Saxon artefacts in

Britain during the time of King Arthur (516–550)

PICTS
- DAL RIAD
- CAED
- CELYDDON
- LOTHIAN
- Caer Corstopitum
- Llial
- Segedunum
- Caer
- Ebrauc
- Manau
- RHEGED
- DEIRA
- Mons
- Caer Seint
- Deva
- Lindum
- Caer Llyr
- ANGLES
- Cardigan
- DYPED
- Caer Myrddin
- Caer Lleol
- Glevum
- Corinium
- Salisbury
- SASI
- Glastonbury
- Kaneleó
- Winchester
- Tintagel
- CORNWALL
- Caer Esk
- Caer Gugan
- SCILLY

a flexible demarcation line, beyond which the victor drove the Saxons after defeating them, a line running roughly along the eastern edge of the Salisbury Plain (today's Hampshire) northwards through the Chiltern Hills to the line formed by the rivers Trent and Humber.

So who was it that halted the Saxons in the east, putting a stop to their raids and expansion? Of course, it must have been a talented military commander, *a* true *Dux Bellorum*, and one so popular and charismatic that he managed to unite and subjugate the British clans, forming a disciplined army from them. How did this leader defeat the numerous, battle-hardened and hitherto undefeated Saxons? The answer is clear – by employing a strategy and tactics that proved lethal to his opponents, against which they had no defence. Roman tactics. Sources and research confirm that, although the backbone and strength of Roman formations usually lay in a compact infantry formation, the troops stationed in Britain were predominantly cavalry, known as *cataphracti*, who proved more effective against the swift chariots of the Celts and the Picts, who employed *hit-and-run* tactics. What may be of interest to us is that, according to some historians, two thousand cavalrymen stationed on Hadrian's Wall hailed from… Sarmatia. In accordance with Roman custom, upon completing their service, soldiers acquired the right to settle in the region where they had served. It is therefore not out of the question that the later Knights of the Round Table learnt the art of combat on horseback from the descendants of the 'centaurs' of the Sarmatian steppes, trained in Roman tactics.

So what does a capable commander deploy against the Saxons? Rapid manoeuvres and a devastating cavalry charge, modelled on *the* Roman *cataphracts*, perhaps improved upon and even better adapted to local conditions. He pits horsemen armed with a long, British sword against the Saxon hordes on foot; according to armoury experts, this sword had a blade considerably longer than that of the Roman gladius, so the short Germanic saxes were no match for it. These horsemen were also protected by a shield (*scutum*) and armour (*lorica segmentata*), perhaps supplemented by chainmail

made of iron rings (*lorica hamata*), which most historians and weapons experts (e.g. Andrzej Nadolski) consider to be an invention of the British Celts. Moreover, these horsemen quickly discovered the advantages of the heavy spear, later known as the lance – a weapon that could only be used from horseback. A weapon that, over a thousand years later, would tip the balance at Kircholm and Vienna.

We therefore have logical evidence for the existence of such a commander and of armoured knights; we have logical evidence for victory in a decisive battle. Why, then, should we fundamentally doubt the accounts of the chroniclers who situate this battle at Mount Badon, who named this capable commander Arthur, and his cavalry the Knights of the Round Table?

Who were these chroniclers, what and how did they write about Arthur, and how did they influence the final shape of the myth – I shall tell you.

Arthur in the chronicles, Arthur in poetry

The first references that may pertain to Arthur appear in the works of the Welsh monk Gildas (516?–570). In **De excidio et conquestu Britanniae**, there is mention of the Battle of Badon, which, according to Gildas, is said to have taken place on the day of his birth – that is, around the year 516. Yet Gildas says not a word about who – personally – was the victor. The name Arthur does not appear.

Another Welshman, also a monk, Nennius, wrote (c. 796) a work entitled **Historia Britonum* * – and here we do find Arthur, named by his first name and described with the epithets **Dux Bellorum* * and **Comes Britanniarum**. Nennius lists the locations of all twelve of Arthur's victories, including the battle of Mons Badonicus, which forms the culmination of the work, in which Arthur 'with his own hands' slew 960 (!) opponents. Leaving aside this implausible feat of chivalry, it is worth noting, however, that to this day scholars are at loggerheads over theories regarding the actual locations of the twelve battles mentioned by Nennius. There is neither

No sign of it, not even a whisper. Even Badon Hill, the site of Arthur's most famous battle, has as many as six possible locations: Bath, Avon, Badbury, Brentwood, Berkshire and Bathampton[4].

In *the *Annales Cambriae** by an unknown author, written around the year 956, the date of the Battle of Badon is specified precisely as the year 516. The date and circumstances of Arthur's death are also given – he fell in the Battle of Camlann in the year 537.

Joseph Campbell refers to the period during which the Arthurian legend emerged from an orally transmitted folk tradition and found its way into the chronicles (550–950) as a 'mythogenic moment'**. Next, according to Campbell, came the first period of the development of the oral tradition (950–1066), during which the legend of Arthur emerged as the hope of Britain – a king who did not die at all, but resides on the Isle of Avalon (in a cave in the Welsh mountains, in the Antipodes, amongst the elves, in the depths of Mount Etna's crater, etc.) ***

This was followed by the second period of development (1066–1140). Campbell argues that, following William the Conqueror's conquest of the island, there ensued an era of development in bardic poetry and a period of immense popularity for their works. The Frankish Normans adored the bards, and no celebration at a Norman castle

• [8] The remaining eleven battles mentioned by Nennius are (in chronological order): 1. on the River Glein, 2, 3, 4, 5. – on the River Dubglass, 6. on the River Bassas, 7. at Cait Cellydon, that is, in the Caledonian Forest, 8. at Caer Guinnion, 9. at the City of Legions, 10. on the River Tribruit, 11. at Agned Hill. Nennius's place names do not readily correspond to any known locations, with the possible exception of the City of the Legions (Caerleon). The battle in the Caledonian Forest, in the far North, must have been fought against the Picts rather than the Saxons, who had not yet reached Caledonia at that time.

* * Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology – The Masks of God*, New York 1968.

****King Arthur's* Cave is situated in Wales, not far from the town of Monmouth, known in Welsh as Trefynwy. Other (according to local traditions) resting places of the king include Arthur's Barrow (Carnedd Arthur) in Snowdonia, the Neath Valley in South Wales, the village of Cadbury in Somerset, and the Eildon Hills in Scotland.

No lord's feast could take place without a bard's performance. During this period, a wealth of elements from Celtic mythology and heroic tales found their way into the Arthurian legend. The Norman knights wanted to hear tales of the chivalrous deeds of the Paladins of the Round Table, whilst the Celtic bards, suffering from a lack of material, attributed to Arthur's knights the exploits of Cuchulainn, Finn Mac Cumhaill, Diarmuid, Taliesin, Gwydion, Peredur, Lleu Law Gyffes, Pwyll, Manawyddan ap Llyr and other gods and heroes, the protagonists of local, Irish and Welsh legends, which were already being collected and incorporated into *the Mabinogion*, *the* Welsh *'Handbook for Young Bards'*, at that time. We shall return to this fact later. For now, however, let us turn to the chronicles – for Campbell's second period was also accompanied by the development of the legend in written accounts.

It was during this very period that *the *Gesta Regum Anglorum** was written by the learned monk William of Malmesbury (1080–1143). Brother William (as is traditional) describes Arthur's exploits at Badon, but – take note – the book also contains the first scholarly critique of the myth in history. William draws attention to the mountain of fabrications and nonsense that have accumulated around the historical and glorious figure of King Arthur, and severely rebukes the fabulists and storytellers. Immediately afterwards, however, the scholar repeats – in all seriousness – that at the Battle of Mons Badonicus, Arthur personally slew over nine hundred Saxons*.

The most important Arthurian document of this period, however, was Geoffrey's **Historia Regum Britanniae**

* The poet Michael Drayton (1563–1631) challenges this implausible figure. According to Drayton, Arthur killed 'only' three hundred Saxons at Badon; I quote:

Pendragon's worthy son, who waded there in blood
Three hundred Saxons slew with his own valiant hand.

As for myself, I am inclined towards the theory which suggests, for the sake of plausibility, that the last two zeros should be dropped from biblical and legendary figures. If one were to do so, then according to Nennius, Arthur slew nine and six-tenths of a person at Badon, and according to Drayton – exactly three.

by Monmouth (1100–1154), describing the earliest history of Britain (from Brutus the Trojan) and making the reign of King Arthur the apogee and culmination of that history. The book was published in 1139 and caused a terrible stir. Even contemporary scholars denounced it as an apocryphal work, nonsense, humbug and a blatant fabrication. Geoffrey insisted that, whilst writing his *History...* he had made use of an original document in the Briton language, which he had received as a gift from the Archdeacon of Oxford. It was almost unanimously concluded that this 'original Briton document' – like the rest of the 'facts' presented by Geoffrey – was nothing but pure fabrication, falsification and confabulation. This opinion did not in the least prevent this undoubtedly apocryphal work from becoming a sensation and a bestseller almost overnight – there was not a single court in civilised Europe at the time where **History** was not read *aloud…* or discussed. For the work was indeed interesting… from a literary point of view. Although Geoffrey gave the book a serious and scholarly tone, he did not confine himself to a dry, chronicle-like account of Arthur, but included an entire novel within it – the circumstances of the king's birth, his rise to power, his acquisition of the sword Caliburn, his marriage to Guanhamara (Guinevere) and her betrayal (with Medrawt, the king's nephew, not his son), the battle between Arthur and Medrawt ending in the deaths of both rivals at the Battle of Cambula (Camlann), Guanhamara-Guinevere's refuge in a convent, and finally the king's final journey to Avalon in the year of our Lord 542. He also named Arthur's key companions, who later became canonical: Walgan (Gawain), Kai and Bedivere. On top of that, he crammed in a host of legendary and fairy-tale elements. He also included the wizard Merlin – his entire story, including the magical transport of the Stonehenge Stone Circle from Ireland to Salisbury Plain, was set out in the works **Prophetiae Merlini** and **Vita Merlini** (1134–1140). Thus, as we can see, Geoffrey of Monmouth laid the actual foundation stone for the legend's later form, and he undoubtedly deserves the copyright to it. Not a single later author strayed far from the framework established by Geoffrey. Moreover , the contribution *of *The History of the Kings...**

to English literature was truly colossal – one can safely say that without Geoffrey of Monmouth there would have been no Chaucer and no Elizabethan drama. And if there had been no Chaucer and no Elizabethan drama... Hmmm...

Joseph Campbell refers to the next period (1136–1230) as the literary period and divides it into the following four sub-periods:

A. The Anglo-Norman patriotic epic (1137–1205)

The Arthurian legend, as presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth, suddenly took on political significance. The tale of a mighty king of England, Wales, Ireland, Normandy and Brittany – a king who conquered Gaul, Aquitaine, Rome and Norway – appealed to the imperial ambitions of the descendants and successors of William the Conqueror: Henry I, Stephen of Blois and Henry II Plantagenet. The legend had to be popularised and expanded in order to strengthen the patriotic unity of the nation under a single ruler and to justify territorial claims. *The* prosaic **Historia Regum...**, which masquerades as a chronicle, is rendered into French verse – for cultured England spoke French at that time. The translation was carried out by the monk Wace (1100–1175), author of *the* work **Geste de Bretons**, also known as the **Brut**, as Wace took as his starting point the legend—already familiar to us, as recounted by Geoffrey of Monmouth—of the Britons' descent from Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas of Troy.

Half a century later, Layamon, a cleric from Worcester, translated Wace's work into an alliterative epic in the Anglo-Saxon language (Old English) – thereby creating two amusing paradoxes. Firstly, his imperial-patriotic work appeared at a time when the country was beginning to fall apart and descend into chaos under the rule of King John Lackland. Secondly, Layamon extols the deeds of Arthur in the language of the very people whom King Arthur had plundered – and for which he was most notorious.

Both of these authors essentially do nothing more than translate – the basic shape and image of the legend remain identical to Geoffrey's. Wa-

ce, however, we owe a contribution to the legend that is nothing short of first-rate – he was the first to describe the Round Table, and even its dimensions – fifty knights sat at it. The Vicar Layamon, meanwhile, explains the significance of the table's shape, which was intended to put an end to the disputes common amongst Celtic chieftains over the place of honour at the banquet table. Both works speak of Arthur as the 'hope of Britain' – the king did not die; he was taken by the elves to Avalon, from where he will return when things begin to go truly wrong in his homeland. The legend, as we can see, begins to serve not only political purposes, but also to lift people's spirits.

This is not the last purpose it will serve.

B. The French courtly romance (1160–1230)

For the French, who had their own epic about Charlemagne and romances about the deeds of his paladins (*the* so-called *chansons de geste*), the figure of Arthur as King of the Britons was neither poetically compelling nor interesting, and the English chauvinism of the legend could only have been a nuisance to them. It was Arthur's companions, the Knights of the Round Table, who aroused interest in France, for the fashion at the time was for tales of individual exploits, solitary adventures… and love. For the ideal and the main theme of the songs and romances of the French troubadours was courtly love, *amour courtois* – the romantic adventures of valiant knights and their deeds, performed in honour of and in defence of beautiful ladies. At the courts that patronised the troubadours and trouvères (for example, at Poitiers under Eleanor of Aquitaine), the story of Arthur and Britain (*matière de Bretagne*) became a popular theme for ballads. Meanwhile, *the* so-called *'romans bretons'* emerged as a specialised type of ballad and love romance within the *'amour courtois'* tradition, dealing with the loves and liaisons of the Knights of the Round Table.

The period in question was a time of the Arthurian myth's massive expansion across Europe. The poetry of the French troubadours was known and popular everywhere, for at that time

French language, *the 'langue romaine'*, was the language of the whole of civilised Europe – other languages and scripts were only just emerging. Old French was in use and popular in Britain long before the invasion of William the Conqueror. At the Battle of Hastings, Anglo-Saxon and Franco-Norman knights hurled French insults at one another.

Chrétien de Troyes (1135–1183), court poet to Marie of Champagne, was the most famous troubadour, who began to use Camelot solely as a backdrop for the opening scene – this is where the adventure began, from here the knight set off on his quest – Arthur gave him his blessing and did not appear again in the tale. The knights were the more important – and the main – characters.

Chrétien wrote a whole series of verse romances about 'good knights'. Most of them (*Tristan, Erec and Enid, Cliges, Yvain*) have their counterparts in the written versions of Welsh romances and epics emerging at the same time, but for the record, it remains unclear to this day who modelled themselves on whom – Chrétien on the anonymous Welsh authors, or the other way round. This does not alter the fact that the root was clearly the same – Celtic mythology. The songs of the Celtic bards, sung (in French!) in the castles of Anglo-Norman knights, made their way to continental Europe and were just as popular there as they were in England. Do you remember Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's **The Crusaders**, the scene in which Robert of Normandy's bard sings songs about 'Keus, the good cupbearer'? The year is 1097, the First Crusade – Chrétien de Troyes and Geoffrey of Monmouth had not yet been born, but this scene cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered a literary anachronism. The tales of Arthur, Kay and *the* entire *matière de Bretagne* may well have been known to the Crusaders. However, Kossak-Szczucka commits an anachronism in this scene – in one detail, or rather two. We shall return to this later.

On the other hand , the romance **Lancelot, or The Knight on the Cart ** (**Lancelot ou li chevaliers a la charrette**), created from scratch by Chrétien, must be regarded as genuinely original. It is of interest to us because of its pioneering inclusion of—

Chrétien's romance contributes to the structure of the legend of this important knight and the story of his love for Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere. Chrétien's romance recounts the well-known and later canonical tale of the queen's abduction by the wicked Prince Meleagant and her rescue by the heroic Lancelot of the Lake. Having lost his warhorse, Lancelot must rush to the queen's aid on a peasant's cart – hence the title. The tale must have deeply moved the knights at the time and brought tears to the ladies' cornflower-blue eyes – after all, for a knighted man, riding on a peasant's cart was a terrible disgrace! Someone from Meleagant's castle, seeing Lancelot approaching, cried out: 'Oh, a knight on a cart! They must be taking him off to be hanged!' In the romance, Lancelot endured this humiliation without batting an eyelid; he sacrificed his pride and chivalrous honour for his beloved, for he loved her passionately and sincerely. Chrétien knew how to provoke his audience – that is the mark of a great bard!

And Chrétien de Troyes was a great bard. In his hands, the Arthurian legend became literature for the first time. Art. The subject matter and message recede into the background – what becomes important is the form and the manner of telling the story – *la conte*. *Voilà le grand conteur*!

**Perceval, or The Legend of the Grail* (*Perceval, ou li contes del graal*)*, Chrétien's final work, is yet another significant contribution by the poet to the structure of the Arthurian legend. Here appears something that had not been there before: the Grail.

The eponymous Perceval the Welshman is an innocent simpleton who longs to become a knight. Before he reaches Arthur's court, he has all sorts of amusing adventures. Chrétien once again teases his audience – the mischievous French are particularly amused by the fact that Perceval is *a 'pucelle'*, a virgin who regularly and hilariously misses his chances – that is, the ladies he encounters.

And now for the promised detailed anachronism from Zofia Kossak-Szczucka: during the First Crusade, Perceval and the Grail appear in the ballads of the Norman bard and in the conversations of the crusaders, yet neither should have been there. Both Perceval and the Grail were introduced by Chrétien de Troyes eighty years later! Had Kossak-Szczucka's bard sung the praises of the Welsh Peredur, there would have been no anachronism.

We return to Chrétien's romance – to the virgin Perceval, who, now a knight, finds himself in the mysterious castle of the Fisher King, who is suffering from an incurable wound. Perceval is shown a strange vessel, known as the Grail… He is also shown a spear dripping with blood…

And here comes an unexpected twist in the tale. A mystery play begins; some secret rite is performed before the audience's very eyes. The Great Mystery. And the story breaks off. Perceval did not ask the question the Fisher King was expecting. And Chrétien did not finish his work. He left an enigma...

An enigma to which we shall return.

C. Religious tales of the Grail (1180–1230)

These include the trilogy **Joseph of Arimathea**, **The History of the Holy Grail** and **Merlin and Perceval**, written between 1190 and 1198 by the Burgundian poet Robert de Boron. Only the first part of the trilogy has survived to the present day. We do not know the other two, and we never will. They have been lost.

What we do know, however, is something more important – the so-called *Vulgate* Cycle, comprising **The History of the Holy Grail**, **The History of Merlin**, **The Books of Lancelot**, **The Quest for the Holy Grail ** and **The Death of Arthur**. The *Vulgate* Cycle was composed between 1215 and 1235 by a group of anonymous Cistercian monks. There is a theory that the monks had been inspired to write down (and give a religious interpretation to) the Arthurian legend much earlier by their great confrere, Bernard of Clairvaux, the guardian and reformer of the order, and one of the greatest moral authorities of his time. Bernard of Clairvaux fully understood the didactic and moral significance of the legend – and its socio-technical role*.

* In attributing the authorship of the *Vulgate* Cycle to the Cistercians, inspired by the teachings of St Bernard, I rely on Joseph Campbell, as I have confidence in him. There are, however, other theories – some scholars name the Knights Templar as the authors, whilst others believe that the author was Gautier Map. This latter claim is utterly preposterous, as Gautier Map died in 1209. A fairly large group of scholars, with a comfortable yet disarming candour, claim that nothing is known.

The *Vulgate* cycle represents a further powerful expansion and enrichment of the myth. Building on Geoffrey of Monmouth's **History…** and the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, the monks add further building blocks to the edifice, the most important of which are:

– the story of the Grail and the exodus of Joseph of Arimathea,
– the genealogy and extensive development of the character of Lancelot of the Lake, elevating this knight to the status of the legend's leading hero,
– the illicit affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, King Arthur's wife,
– the somewhat less sinful affair between Lancelot and the virgin Elaine, from which the virtuous, pious and pure-as-a-tear Galahad is born,
– the countless adventures of Arthur's knights: Lancelot, Gawain, Kay, Bors, Lionel, Perceval, Hector de Maris, etc.,
– the quest for the Holy Grail (fruitless for sinners, but crowned with success when the pure Galahad undertook the mission),
– Mordred's revolt and betrayal as a direct consequence of Guinevere and Lancelot's sin, the massacre at Camlann as a kind of *Götterdämmerung* and a warning to future generations not to sin.

As can be seen, the legend begins to serve a new purpose. A full-scale assault by the Church begins, aimed at appropriating a legend that is, after all, thoroughly secular and, in its origins, even post-pagan, in order to use it as its own instrument of influence. Firstly, a code for the true Christian knight is to be established – not in the form of dry commandments and warnings hurled from the pulpit, but in the form of an easily digestible and universally beloved myth. The Arthurian legend in *the Vulgate* aims to demonstrate that chivalric ideals and the ethics of chivalry have a religious, indeed evangelical, origin, and that chivalry fulfils a salvific role – it is nothing other than the armed wing of the Church.

Secondly – moral standards. Love, *'amour courtois'*, until recently extolled by Chrétien before a moved audience of enamoured couples, weeping over the heartfelt misfortunes of Tristan or Lancelot, becomes

In the *Vulgate* Cycle, she is sinful and impure. The legendary woman, until recently an object of admiration and veneration—and at times even of cult-like worship—for the troubadours, becomes, in accordance with doctrine, *an instrumentum diaboli*.

It is fair to say, however, that the *Vulgate* Cycle is an interesting, skilful and highly innovative literary work. The work takes the form of a 'river novel' and is written in prose. *The Vulgate* thus differs from the troubadour romances, which were recited aloud, in its elite nature – prose is intended for silent reading, and therefore exclusively for those who can read. In prose, there is no room for the text to be made more engaging through rhyme, rhythm and stress – that is, the bard's interpretation. Prose must have an appealing form and captivate the reader through literary technique. The anonymous authors *of the Vulgate* employed the so-called *'entrelacement'* technique (interweaving), what we sometimes refer to today as a 'nested narrative' – one story begins, another interrupts it, a third interrupts the second, only to return to the first, and so on. The plot, however, has lost none of its appeal to this day. *The Vulgate* is a brilliant read.

The Arthurian legend in Poland was introduced to readers mainly through translations of the *Vulgate* Cycle **.*

D. German heroic epics (1200–1215)

We are referring to Hartmann von Aue (1168–1210), the author of the epics **Erec** and **Ivein**, modelled on Chrétien de Troyes (and, indirectly, on Welsh legends); Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170–1220), author *of *Parzival**; and Gottfried von Strassburg (1170–1215), author of the epic **Tristan und*

* Most recent translation: *Tales of the Round Table*, edited (and considerably abridged) by Jacques Boulenger, PIW 1987, translated by Krystyna Dolatowska and Tadeusz Komendant. The passages *from the Vulgate* quoted in this text are taken from this very translation. The exception is the tale of the knight Bors, in which I have taken the liberty of including a few **les belles infidèles** to make it more amusing.

Isolt, modelled on Thomas of Brittany, as well as Ulrich von Zatzikhoven, who continued the character of Lancelot following on from Chrétien. Following the example of the French troubadours, the Germans pushed the figure of King Arthur and the affairs of Britain into the background, focusing their attention on the knights.

The contribution of the German minnesingers to the Arthurian legend, however, lay mainly in their attempts to complete Chrétien's **Perceval** and to unravel the enigma of the Grail. The greatest credit for this goes to the knight Wolfram von Eschenbach (who was, in fact, a master, a virtuoso with the lance, and the winner of numerous tournaments).

The German versions of the Arthurian legend contributed to the wider dissemination of the myth across Europe – both in the authors' own time and much later, when there was a renewed fascination with Arthur, the Grail and the Round Table. Richard Wagner, after all, based his operas on the poetry of the German minnesingers.

There is also no doubt that the legend of Arthur first reached Poland and the Czech lands in a German adaptation and language version. In Germany, after all, Arthur is still invariably called Artus to this day, and this form was once adopted here too – and has survived in the name of the famous Artus Court in Gdańsk, or in Boy's translation *of* Villon's **Grand Testament** ("Artus, the valiant Duke of Brittany…"). It was only later in Poland that the legendary king began to be referred to as Artur – but in the Czech Republic *he* is still *known as King Artuš*, just as in Germany.

It seems that the Arthurian legend first found its way into Poland (in the 13th century) via Silesia, through the patronage of princes who were patrons and protectors of poets, such as Bolko I of Świdnica, Henry III the White of Wrocław and Henry Probus, whose courts were teeming with bards and minnesingers, and where the Western chivalric tradition was very much alive. It is also worth mentioning the Teutonic Knights, who held 'Arthurian courts' in most of their castles. Among the great enthusiasts of the legend was the Commander of Człuchów, and later Grand Master of the Order, Konrad von Wallenrode, the initiator of the famous Teutonic 'Arthurian feasts' – after

the sacking, slaughter and burning of some town in Mazovia, Lithuania or Poland, an 'Arthurian Round Table' was organised – a feast for the twelve pious brothers who had distinguished themselves most during the massacre.

The 14th and 15th centuries saw a further growth in interest in Arthur and the Round Table. In England, the romance **Gawain and the Green Knight** was written, probably by an anonymous author of *the* famous **Perlesvaus**. Thomas Chestre added Sir Launfal to the ranks of the Knights of the Round Table, a knight modelled on Lanval from the 12th-century ballad by Marie de France. In France, two anonymous works and two new heroes emerged. The first is **Perlesvaus, Le Haut Livre du Graal**, featuring the eponymous Perlesvaus. The second is **Perceforest**, which combines the Arthurian myth with the story of Alexander the Great and introduces the eponymous Perceforest (He Who Forges Through the Forest) into Arthur's circle of knights. The myth also gained popularity in countries less closely associated with the legend – Lancelot of the Lake became the eponymous hero of an anonymous epic in the Low Countries. In Portugal (Castile?), other anonymous authors created further new heroes of the legend – one was Amadis de Gaula, or 'the Welshman', also known as the Knight of the Flaming Sword; the other was Palmerin d'Inglaterra, or 'the Englishman'. The tales of Amadis and Palmerin gained immense popularity – both are mentioned in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Amadis (as Amadigi) found his way into Italian poetry (Bernardo Tasso).

And so, at last, the time came for the culmination and crowning achievement: the most complete and best-known version of the tale of the King of Albion and his knights. In the year of our Lord 1485, the knight Thomas Malory completed work on his life's work. **Le Morte Darthur** (*The Death of Arthur*, not to be confused with the similarly titled instalment of the *Vulgate* Cycle) is a true monument to the legendary king and the beautiful, noble, bygone days of chivalry. It is worth noting that the bulk of the work was written in prison, where the good knight Malory spent quite a few years for… armed robbery and the rape of a woman.

Malory gathered and utilised everything his predecessors had created, so it is no wonder *that *Le Morte...** is so extensive and rich – and at times pushed to the limits of redundancy. Outside the windows of the prison where the writer was held, however, the murderous, bloody and cruel War of the Roses was raging, in which chivalric ideals and virtues dissolved into the blood, mud and filth of the battlefields of Wakefield, Bosworth, Barnet and Tewkesbury. It is therefore hardly surprising that Malory's work is brimming with nostalgia, sorrow and *a* poignant *memento mori*.

Le Morte... is a masterpiece, superbly written, and stands as one of the most fascinating examples of English prose in general. It has also set a record that few books – apart from the Bible – can boast: from the moment it was printed by William Caxton's printing house in Westminster – famous throughout Europe at the time – in 1488, right up to the present day , **Le Morte...** has never been *out of print* for a single moment – there has never been a time when this book was not being printed and sold somewhere. However, little remains of Malory's original version. Suffice it to say that no reader has ever encountered the author's original version – Caxton himself, during the first typesetting, altered the manuscript and changed the order of the chapters (books). Since then, the book has been adapted thousands of times – edited, abridged, rewritten, with supposedly new versions compiled on the basis of supposedly rediscovered manuscripts; adapted for very young, young, middle-aged and grown-up children; adapted into an opera and *a fantasy novel*, and from *fantasy* into a musical; and finally, it was even made into a film and adapted into *a role-playing game*. In this way, **Le Morte Darthur** became a classic, and Malory's vision and version became established as the authoritative, classic portrayal of the Arthurian myth.

That's right, the definitive one. Literature has completely supplanted history and realism – assuming, of course, that Arthur was a real person. We listen to the arguments of 'historians' and 'realists' with reluctance or dismiss them out of hand. Let them go on saying that Camelot, if it ever existed at all, could not have had high walls and soaring towers adorned with banners

tower – it probably resembled a mound of earth, on top of which stood a thatched shed behind a wooden palisade. Let them say that in the 5th–6th centuries, Arthur, Lancelot and Gawain could not have worn full plate armour and helmets with movable visors; that they wore, at most, primitive chainmail or Roman loricae worn over sheepskin coats and woollen tartans; that a knightly tournament was a concept entirely unknown to them, and that no chivalric custom or ceremony (such as knighthood) which we take for granted today even existed in its embryonic form. That competing in a joust, that spectacular form of knightly combat so beloved of us, was absolutely unthinkable in Arthur's time – stirrups, without which such combat is impossible, were not yet known in Europe at that time, nor had hollow lances, which could be shattered, yet been invented. Finally, that Sir Lancelot or Sir Gawain could not have been 'sirs' at all, because that title (and the very idea of chivalry as we understand it today) was only brought to England by the Normans under William the Conqueror...

Let the realists say what they like and as much as they like. We know better. Literature is always right! Were it not for Homer, not only would we not know how the siege of Troy unfolded – we would not even know that such an event had taken place at all. No historian has brought us closer to imagining the Rome of Augustus, Caligula and Claudius quite as Robert Graves has. We know what happened in Russia in 1812 from reading Tolstoy. We know of Poland in the time of Mieszko and Bolesław Chrobry from Bunsch and Gołubiew; we know of the First Crusade and the capture of Jerusalem from Kossak-Szczucka; and Sienkiewicz provides us with a comprehensive account of the Polish-Cossack wars and the Swedish Deluge. And so it goes.

And the same goes for the Arthurian myth. It was just as it is written in **Le* Morte*… by Thomas Malory… or rather, in the adaptation of Malory's work that we've read.

Joking aside. Of course, it is the 'historians' and 'realists' who are right. Chrétien de Troyes and Malory confabulate and embellish. Arthur was a Briton, a Celt. The real ob-

The origins of his story can lie solely in the original Celtic legends – legends whose source and roots lie in Celtic mythology. Even before Malory began his work, around the year 1400, the first written, complete, anonymous collection of fundamental Welsh legends and myths saw the light of day. The collection had to wait a little longer for its English translation – and popularisation –; it was not until 1849 that Lady Charlotte Guest produced a translation and gave the collection the name *Mabinogion* (meaning 'Compendium of the Young Bard'). In the numerous tales (known as 'branches') that make up *the Mabinogion*, King Arthur features – how could it be otherwise? – though he is hard to recognise, for this is the Welsh Arthur. And as such – presumably the real one. Among his companions, too, we recognise the real ones, bearing authentic, as yet unaltered names: Kei, Bedwyr, Gwalchmei, Gwalchfaved, Peredur, Owein ap Urien Rheged, Trystan ap Tallwch, Gereint ap Erbin. We meet Arthur's real parents, named Uthr Bendragon and Eigr ferch Amlawdd*.

There is also the queen, Arthur's wife – her name is Gwenhwyfar ferch Orgyrvran. There is also a wise adviser – the druid Taliesin Pen Berydd. And the king's magical sword? It is there, of course. It is called Caledwvlch. Try pronouncing that, and it will become clear to you why Geoffrey of Monmouth preferred the name Caliburn, and Malory, Excalibur.

Between 1066 and 1230, as I mentioned earlier, there was a vogue for the songs of the Celtic bards. It is safe to assume that all (or almost all) authors of subsequent versions of the Arthurian myth were at least somewhat familiar with Welsh tales and triads**, and had some knowledge of British legends. And the tales and legends of the Celts have their roots in beliefs and mythology. To better understand the Arthurian myth—

* The patronymic *'ap'* means 'son', and *'ferch'* means 'daughter'.

** The triad was a fundamental and very popular poetic form in Wales – it was based on the principle of threes: three characters, three events in the plot, three statements or morals – or three lines of a stanza. Triads constitute the oldest surviving examples of Welsh poetry – some of them are considered to be as old as

and that we need to have some understanding of Celtic mythology.

The pantheon of the ancient Britons – the roots of the legend

The pantheon of the British Celts, those of Wales and Cornwall, is rich and somewhat – due to the family ties between the gods – complex. The matter is further complicated by the fact that it is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish the gods from demigods or mortal heroes, and vice versa. For gods and heroes are equal protagonists in legends and epics, and the gods (and heroes) in Britain (as in Ireland) were venerated chiefly through the songs of bards. Sanctification and worship through poetry were characteristic of the British Celts – hence the scarcity of iconographic material to support our current understanding of this people's beliefs.

The primary pair of British solar deities is the Mother of the Gods, Dôn (Dona), and her consort Bel (Beli). Dôn is undoubtedly the equivalent of the Irish (Gaelic) Danu, and the offspring of Dôn and Bel correspond to the Irish Children of Danu, the Tuatha Dé Danann. Bel, in turn, corresponds to Belinus, who was worshipped in Gaul.

The children of Dôn and Bel are Nudd Silver-Handed (a lunar deity) and Govannan (the divine blacksmith, akin to Hephaestus), as well as Arianrod (Silver Ring) and the wise Gwydion, druid of the gods, also depicted as the Welsh Prometheus, who cared for the welfare of the people and looked after them. The mentor

is as old as the language itself. Here is an example of one of the triads (my translation, of course, from the English version):

Britain has witnessed three magnificent victory feasts:
The feast of Caswallawna, after the rout of Julius Caesar,
The feast of Aurelius Ambrosianus, after the victory over the Saxons,
And the feast of King Arthur at Caerleon on the River Usk.

and Gwydion's guardian was the divine sage Math ap Mathonwy, brother of Dôn.

Mythology links Arianrod and Gwydion in a romantic (?) relationship, the fruit of which is the most important god of the Britons, the Welsh Phoebus and Apollo, god of light and the sun, of harvest, and patron of all crafts and arts – Lleu Llaw Gyffes, the equivalent of the Irish Lugh (Lugh Lamh-fada).

One of the most important centres of worship for Lleu-Lug was Lugudunum, Caer Lial – that is, Lleu's Stronghold, today's Carlisle.

However, as there is no sun without shadow, the second son of Arianrod and Gwydion is Dylan, the evil and dark Son of Fal (the Celts inextricably linked the mythological powers of darkness with those of the sea).

Gwyn, on the other hand, is the son of the lunar god Nudd. Contrary to his name (Gwyn means 'White'), Nudd's son is a dark god of battle and death, the ruler of the Tylwyth Têg, the Welsh evil spirits. Gwyn (known as Melwas in Cornwall and Avallach in Somerset) was the Hunter, the Hunter of the Souls of the Dead, roaming the land by night on his ghostly steed. As such, he was undoubtedly the prototype for Hern the Hunter, known from later legends.

The second group of gods (also lunar) descends from Llyr, lord of the seas. The main place of worship for the God of the Seas was Caer Llyr, later known as Ratae Coritanorum, then as Llyr-Cestre, and now Leicester. Llyr had two wives. One was Penardun, daughter of Dôn (a symbolic union of the bright sun and the dark sea). The other was the no less symbolic Iweridd (Eriu, or Ireland). Penardun bore Llyr a daughter, Creudyład, and a son, Manawyddan. 'Ireland', Iweridd, was the mother of the giant Brân (the Raven) and Branwen (White-Breasted).

The Celtic Hades, the Underworld, the Land of Enchantment, known as Annwvyn, is ruled by the chthonic god Arawn, who is later replaced by Pwyll, a mortal, Prince of Dyfed, husband of the fair Rhiannon (the Great Queen). Their son is Pryderi ap Pwyll. The deities of Annwvyn were hostile to the children of Dôn, but friendly towards the children of Llyr. The Welsh Annwvyn, unlike the Greek Hades—

It was a beautiful land – it has survived in fairy tales as the Land of Fairies, Faërie, Fairy Land. And there is one more important difference between Annwvyn and Hades: the boundary between the living, real world and the realm of magic and shadows is very thin among the Celts – crossing it is exceedingly easy for mortals. There is no Cerberus guarding the gates, and the River Styx may well turn out to be just any little stream in the first Welsh forest you come across. It does happen, however, that an easy entry means a difficult exit – time in Faërie flows much more slowly than in the real world, and the locals are reluctant to part with their guests. Celtic mythology consists mainly of tales of the gods' loves, their rivalries and their battles. So we have the story of Pwyll's struggle against the rulers of the underworld, culminating in his winning the hand of the beautiful Rhiannon and the title of Pen Annwvyn, Prince of the Abyss. We have the love story of Gwyn ap Nudd and Creudylad, daughter of Llyr*, the god of the seas.

We have the conflict between Light and Darkness embodied in the two brothers, Lleu and Dylan. Dylan is ultimately slain by a spear thrust from his uncle, Govannan, and the waves of the sea lament his death (to this day, the Welsh call the sound of the tide in river estuaries 'Dylan's laments').

One of the most intriguing – and immensely significant for the later Arthurian myth – is the story of Gwydion and Arianrod. Their romantic relationship is brief and leaves no pleasant memories (according to some mythological versions, Gwydion raped Arianrod). Arianrod hates the son she bears – the future sun god – to such an extent that she casts upon him the three most dreadful curses that could befall a Celt: the boy may not have a name, may not bear arms, and may not take a woman of flesh and blood as his wife. The cunning Gwydion, through his wiles, ensures that Arianrod must lift the first two curses – she herself gives her son a name (Lleu Llaw Gyffes – 'Sure Hand') and arms him herself. As for the third curse, however—

* Shakespeare (following Geoffrey of Monmouth) used Llyr to create King Lear, and turned Creudylad into his daughter Cordelia.

cities, Gwydion and Math ap Mathonwy manage on their own – through their magical art, they create a woman… from flowers. This woman, named Blodeuwedd (Flower-Faced), becomes Lleu's wife and nearly brings about his downfall. Unfaithful and treacherous, a veritable Delilah, she deceitfully steals the secret of her husband's life force and exposes him to a lover's deadly blow. But the wise wizard Gwydion is watching over him – he saves Lleu, and punishes Blodeuwedd cruelly: he turns her into an owl, a bird condemned to eternal night – and eternal solitude amongst other birds.

There are also tales of fierce battles between the gods. The giant Brân, son of Llyr, perishes during a tragic and bloody campaign against the Irish. His severed head becomes a sort of talisman and divine oracle. His sister Branwen (at the time of the tragic conflict, the wife of the King of Ireland) dies when her heart breaks with grief upon hearing how many warriors had lost their lives because of her. As for Brân, it is interesting to note that the cult of his severed head is stronger than the cult of the god himself. It is only after Brân's decapitation that he begins to be referred to as the Blessed One (Bendigeid), and his head is called Urddawl Ben (the Venerable Head) or Uther Ben (the Miraculous Head). Buried on the site of present-day London, Brân's head was said to ensure a bountiful harvest and warn of impending invasions and disasters threatening the Island*.

Pryderi, son of Pwyll, heir to the Underworld, is constantly plotting (his name means 'Trouble') and often joins forces in his schemes with Manawyddan, son of Llyr – in Welsh legends, they form a particularly evil pair (the union of Darkness and the Sea). Despite this, they seem to be the Welsh people's favourite heroes. Kigva becomes Pryderi's wife, whilst Pryderi's widowed mother is married off to Manawyddan. From then on, the four of them – Pryderi, Kigva, Manawyddan and Rhiannon – are inseparable.

* According to an old Welsh legend, King Arthur cut off Bran's head, arrogantly claiming that he could manage without warnings or alarms – that he would defeat any invader single-handedly, without divine aid. This act – as history has shown – led to the downfall of both the king and Britain.

Other gods are setting their sights on a magical artefact in the possession of Pwyll and Manawyddan – the Cauldron of Inspiration and Enlightenment. To obtain the Cauldron, Gwydion sneaks into Caer Sidi (the Whirling Castle), but is captured and imprisoned. Finally, in the climactic, symbolic duel between Light and Darkness, Gwydion defeats and kills Pryderi.

This (brief and cursory) overview of the Celtic pantheon of Albion does not cover the full extent of their beliefs. For in practice, there was scarcely a corner of Cornwall and Wales where some specific *genii locorum* were not worshipped. Springs, rivers, lakes, oak groves and hilltops were all considered sacred and personified; it is impossible to list them all. Furthermore, the Romans brought and established a multitude of deities on British soil, introducing virtually their entire classical pantheon, which was enriched over time by the cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras. Gallic deities were also worshipped in Britain – Epona, Nemetona, Belinus, Silvanus, Cernunnos and Ceridwen. There were also, no doubt, some remnants of the little-known beliefs of the original inhabitants of the Islands (the Iberians) that existed and intermingled with Celtic beliefs, such as the cult of the fearsome Cromm Cruach in Ireland.

The link between the world of the gods and the world of humans was a caste characteristic of the Celts – the Druids.

We recall from Robert Graves's writings how fascinated Claudius was by the druids during his British campaign, how he marvelled at their immense influence on society, their mysterious rites and the secret knowledge and arts possessed by these 'people of the oak and mistletoe' or 'oak-men' – for the name 'druid' (based on the Indo-European root **dr, *drys*) derives from the Celtic words **drui, *daur* and **derwen*, meaning 'tree' or 'oak' – hence the modern English word *'tree'*, and the words for 'tree' and 'wood' in all Slavic languages.

The Druids were a special caste of spiritual leaders among the Celtic peoples and tribes. A Druid combined the roles of high priest, adviser, lawyer, arbitrator, oracle, healer, theologian, scholar, historian and chronicler. In early Celtic society, or within a group

Within the tribal structure, the druids' authority was immense and absolute – they were in no way subject to any secular authority, nor were they bound by any obligations towards the ruler. No Celtic ruler, however, would have dared to disregard a druid's counsel – he was obliged to follow it without exception, on pain of 'excommunication', which meant being cast out of society, that is, complete social death.

The Druids constituted a hermetically sealed caste – we know virtually nothing about their internal affairs, and the significance of their rites and mysteries (including human and animal sacrifices, burnt alive) remains a mystery to this day – and a source of endless speculation. What is known, however, is that they were divided into three main groups: the Druids (that is, the sages and judges), the Philidi (referred to by Strabo *as vates*, meaning seers and prophets), and the bards, whose duty was to know all the fundamental myths and to interpret them artistically before an audience. In other words, these three groups divided among themselves such fields as wisdom, custom and law (the druids), knowledge – including esoteric knowledge – and divination (the filids), and poetry combined with propaganda and the work of chroniclers (the bards).

The most famous bards and filids of Britain were the semi-legendary Myrddin Emrys, Taliesin Pen Berydd and Aneurin. They are credited with the authorship of many heroic Welsh songs and tales – including the oldest surviving works of Welsh literature: *the Black Book of Caermarthen* (12th century), *the Book of Taliesin* (14th century) and *the Book of Aneurin* (13th century), as well as countless triads. These bards are, of course, thought to have lived and worked much earlier, in the 5th–6th centuries.

The information given above is, of course, a huge simplification, an extremely fragmentary treatment of this fascinating mythology. I refer those interested to the specialist literature – I myself drew mainly on Thomas Bulfinch's **Mythology**, Charles Squire's **Celtic Myth and Legend, Poetry and Romance**, and *the *Mabinogion**. For those who prefer *fantasy* literature, there is plenty of that too. Evangeline Walton wrote a series of novels corresponding to the branches of

*The Mabinogion: *Prince of Annwn*, *The Children of Llyr*, *The Song of Rhiannon** and **The Island of the Mighty**. Stephen R. Lawhead quotes several passages from *the Mabinogion* almost verbatim in his 'Pendragon' series (*Taliesin, Merlin, Arthur*) and continues the work in a subsequent series comprising the volumes **Song of Albion*, *Paradise War*, *Silver Hand** and **Endless Knot**. Patricia Kennealy-Morrison wrote a four-volume saga set in the world of Celtic beliefs *: *The Copper Crown*, *The Throne of Scone*, *The Silver Branch ** and **The Hawk's Grey Feathers**. Alan Garner wrote the novel **The Owl Service**, dedicated to the legend of Blodeuwedd. The Goidelic Children of Danu (*Tuatha Dé Danann*) and British deities appear – disguised as an extraterrestrial race, but easy to decipher – in Julian May's **Saga of the Exiles ** (**The Many-Coloured Land*, *The Golden Torc*, *The Non-Born King** and **The Adversary**). Much can be read about Celtic beliefs and Druidic rituals in Marion Zimmer Bradley's **The Mists of Avalon** – as well as in her latest book, **The Forest House**.

But even the sparse, limited and fragmentary material presented here should suffice for a better understanding of certain aspects of the Arthurian legend. For the Arthurian legend – like any other – has its roots in mythology – so deeply, in fact, that several centuries of intense tugging have failed to tear it away from it.

And between 1100 and 1500, when the dams burst, this local Celtic legend spread across Europe in hundreds of versions and adaptations. *The Matière de Bretagne* began to take on a universal character; it began to acquire colours and nuances reflecting the contemporary state of mind, and began to express the contemporary anxieties and interests of Europe. These concerns centred on three fundamental, though strongly conflicting, matters: religion, chivalry and love.

Arthur – Christian or pagan? The religious aspect of the myth

What did Arthur believe in?

Until the arrival of the Romans, the souls of the Britons were governed by the Druids on behalf of the rich and colourful Celtic pantheon. Then the Romans arrived. They, as is well known, were religiously tolerant… and adaptable. Do the Celts worship Bel? Why not? After all, he's Jupiter. Do they worship Dôn, Brigit, Morrigan, Eponia and Ceriddwen, aspects of the Great Mother? Fair enough; after all, they're simply Juno-Minerva-Diana-Venus – we Romans worship them too, and we don't forget Cybele and Isis either. The god Llyr? But that's Neptune, who else?

The Romans were less tolerant of the Druids. For one thing, the Druids were constantly fanning the embers of rebellion amongst the masses, and all too often they managed to fan them into quite a sizeable blaze. The Druids incited Cymbeline, Caractacus, Cattius, Boudica and Catrimandua, and the warriors they led would fall into the famous Celtic battle frenzy, transforming into veritable berserkers. Secondly, the Romans were civilised. The druids, however, would sometimes construct a wicker effigy—the dreadful Wicker Man—lock people (and later animals) inside it, and burn them alive as a sacrifice to the gods. Such druids, as Tacitus writes in *his Annals*, were put to the sword. Of the numerous massacres of druids, the most famous is the notorious slaughter on the island of Mona (Anglesey) in the year 61. Thus was born a tradition that has accompanied humanity to this day: the uncivilised, who murder, must be slaughtered in a civilised manner. Long live civilisation.

The massacre on the island of Mona and the anti-Roman rebellions of the Britons, fuelled by the Druids, between 61 and 78 are described by Marion Zimmer Bradley in her recently mentioned latest *fantasy* novel, **The Forest House**.

The Romans, as mentioned earlier, held the island for four centuries. During that time, things were also changing somewhat in Rome

changed. Under Nero, Christians were thrown to the lions, and the apostle Peter the Fisherman (A.D. 64) was crucified upside down. About a quarter of a millennium later (A.D. 313), Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan, prohibiting the persecution of Christians and guaranteeing freedom of religion. Shortly afterwards, in the year 380, during the reign of Theodosius (also the Great), Christianity became the state religion in Rome. In the year 392, Theodosius issued a ban on all polytheistic practices. Throughout the Roman Empire. In the Roman provinces as well. So, in Britain too?

Undoubtedly in Britain as well, but not immediately and not entirely. Nor were churches built straight away in Rome either. The old gods did not give way so easily, and before Theodosius there was also Julian the Apostate. In the province of Britain, far from the centre of power and the apparatus enforcing the new religion, this process probably proceeded even more slowly. The assumption that all the Romans stationed in Britain, and the section of the local population that had assimilated with them, embraced the cross overnight as one man is somewhat implausible.

Nor should we forget that the opposition of the Druids and the Celtic Britons never wavered for a moment. The adherents of the old order, worshippers of Bel and Dôn, Lleu, Nudda and Llyra, who held out in the mountains of Wales and Cornwall, refused to have Jupiter and the divine cult of the Caesars imposed upon them; indeed, they no doubt often drove the missionaries bearing the cross to the four winds.

And after the Romans had left? The Celtic orthodox and the druids undoubtedly offered prayers of thanksgiving to Bel and Lleu; who knows, perhaps they even lit a fire beneath the Wicker Man, packed with people, out of sheer joy. But true Romans, such as Aurelius Ambrosianus, probably remained Christians. Arthur's guardian bears the Roman – and therefore Christian – name Ectorius (Hector)...

As for Arthur himself, some English historians believe that he did not get on particularly well with the Church of the time, and they see evidence of this in the fact that neither the aforementioned Gildas, the leading ecclesiastical chronicler of the period, nor the Venerable Bede (673–735), author of **Historia Ecclesiastica Gen-*

tis Anglorum, make no mention of him at all. Both write of the Britons' victory at Badon, and in those (and later) times, victories were always personal, never collective! Why, then, do the ecclesiastical chroniclers omit the victor's name? Because, historians argue, he was unwelcome and inconvenient to the ecclesiastical chroniclers. Unorthodox. He had – as we would say today – a rather unconventional attitude towards religion.

So with what battle cry on their lips did Arthur's knights attack the Saxons, the worshippers of Wotan? 'Help us, Jesus Christ'? Or perhaps: 'Guide my sword, Great Goddess'? Or perhaps some shouted one thing and others another? Both Nennius and William of Malmesbury tell us that during the battle of Badon, when Arthur personally slew over nine hundred men, his shield bore the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ. But both Nennius and William were writing at a time when the descendants of the worshippers of Wotan—now the Anglo-Saxons—had long since (in the year 597) been baptised, and it was simply not fitting to depict any other image on the shield of the legendary king in the chronicle. But what if the spiritual leaders of the Britons in their struggle against the Saxon Wotan were, after all, the Druids, led by Merlin (Taliesin)? Was the image on Arthur's shield not, by any chance, that of the Great Goddess Dôn? Or the fearsome goddess of war and slaughter, Morrigan? Or Ceridwen, or perhaps Epona, the Great Goddess in her virginal aspects? According to the *Vulgate*, during the battles against the pagan Saxons, all the kings allied with Arthur fought under a white banner bearing a red cross, whilst the king's own banner, in addition to this cross, was further adorned with the image of a red dragon – a distinctly pagan symbol...*

* The Red Dragon is the current emblem of Wales, and its British origin is evident. As for the red cross – this was the emblem of the Crusaders, ordained after the Council of Clermont (1095) by Pope Urban II as a symbol of chivalrous struggle for the faith. For the legendary Saint George of Cappadocia, the dragon-slayer and patron saint of knights, bore the red cross on his shield—

I am by no means seeking irrefutable proof that Arthur was a pagan – for I would not find it, even if I wanted to very much. In the 5th and 6th centuries, Ireland and Britain were already firmly Christian. St Patrick (390–461), patron saint and apostle of Ireland, began his missionary work in Ulster in 432, whilst St Ninian of Solway (c. 360–432), the apostle of Scotland, was already converting the Picts at the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries. St Columba (521–597), founder of the famous monastery on the Hebridean island of Iona, who continued Ninian's work, was almost a contemporary of Arthur. Also a contemporary of Arthur – and somewhat like the legendary Arthur himself – was the patron saint and bishop of Wales, St David, who died around the year 600. As early as the 3rd century, the British Church had and venerated its own martyrs, including the most famous: St Alban (?–c. 303), executed by the Romans at Verulamium, the site where the famous abbey now stands in the town of St Albans.

It is certain that by the 4th century, the British Church was already strong and recognised enough for its representatives to attend the synods at Arles (314) and Rimini (359). The bishopric of Eburacum (York), probably the oldest in England, dates from 314. As for the conversion and propagation of the faith in Britain – as historians confirm – this was carried out very sensibly, even shrewdly: in a way that was easy for the pagan Celts to accept. The missionaries were not particularly bothered by the old gods; indeed, they considered it beneficial when someone listened to the words of the Gospel whilst leaning against a cromlech. Pagan beliefs were not persecuted or condemned wholesale. This is most clearly illustrated by the delicate

approach. This saint is said to have appeared to Richard the Lionheart during the Crusades and thereby helped secure victory in battle. That is why, in 1222 (only then!), St George was chosen as the patron saint of England, and the red cross from his shield became the emblem of England, which remains in use to this day. This was also incorporated into the Arthurian legend, with the red cross being depicted on the banners, shields and tunics of Arthur himself and numerous Knights of the Round Table. A version was also devised according to which this cross was originally painted in his own blood by Joseph of Arimathea on a shield which Galahad had acquired during his quest for the Grail. An interesting combination of legends, constructed retrospectively. A sort of – one might say – retro-legend.

and the tactful work of Saint Columba of the Isle of Iona (521–597), who had been converting the Picts since 563. Seeing that the Picts treated springs and wells with divine reverence, the holy man did not shout, spit, curse or attempt to block off the springs. Quietly, he sprinkled them with holy water and cast out the devil. According to his hagiographers, he baptised three hundred such springs. The Picts continued to revere the springs, but the springs were no longer pagan; they were now consecrated. Clever! Using St Columba's method—which I propose we call the 'spring method'—Brigit, the Goidelic goddess of fire, was transformed into 'St Brigid of Kill Dara'; Brân became 'St Brian' and 'St Brendan the Navigator'. Bran's sister, Branwen, was transformed into the folk Christian Saint Brynwen, patron saint of lovers. Incidentally, countless folk saints were created – there were Cadog, Collen, Dyfan, Eigam, Mochutu, Teilo, Cilgeran, Llawdog, Cynidr, Teulyddog, and so on. Even… two of King Arthur's knights – Geraint and Mabon – were beatified (in the folk tradition, of course). Just two; I haven't come across any others, which is a shame. 'Saint Lancelot' would sound lovely too.

Joking aside – the point of the above was to highlight what is regarded as an indisputable historical fact: the conversion to and spread of Christianity in Britain took place peacefully, patiently and without conflict. In a manner that was astonishingly and unprecedentedly tolerant. In other parts of the world, faith in Christ was imposed by the sword and the whip; idolatry, polytheism and the worship of the old gods were eradicated under penalty of death; those who broke their fast had their teeth knocked out; and idols (sometimes along with their worshippers) were burnt at the stake. This was not the case in Britain. For it must be understood that Christianity did not come to Britain directly from Rome, but from Ireland. The faith was spread in Britain by a highly unusual Christian-Celtic church and its Celtic missionaries*.

* Ireland (according to legend and tradition) was baptised by St Patrick in the 5th century, but it is known that even before Patrick, other missionaries were actively working on the Emerald Isle, including the famous Bishop Palladius. Patrick arrived on the

Thus, in pre-Arthurian Britain, it was the Celtic Christians who were converting the Celtic pagans, which is why they were so successful and effective. The aforementioned monk Gildas writes (in the 6th century) of pagan beliefs, idols and druids as phenomena long past, forgotten and consigned to oblivion. According to Gildas, by the 6th century Britain was entirely Christian. In the oldest known Welsh versions of the legend, Arthur had a bishop in his retinue – named Bedwini. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, however, Arthur's bishop was Dubricius (Brice), who is identified with St Dyfrig, a figure who is (allegedly) historical. And Arthur could – I repeat – could have been a Christian, and an exemplary one at that. And the struggle against the Saxons could also have signified a crusade – a battle between Christ, who had come from Celtic Ireland, and Wotan, a foreign invader arriving from across the North Sea. It may well have been so – Gildas and Bede, contrary to the suggestions of Anglo-Saxon historians, may have ignored Arthur for entirely different, non-religious reasons.

We do not know what really happened, and we will never know. We can only speculate, and in such speculation we are aided by authors *of* Arthurian *fantasy*, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and her **The Mists of Avalon**. We shall return to this book later.

If, however, we were to go by the text *of the Vulgate* or Malory's **Le Morte d'Arthur**, all doubts should be dispelled. Arthur and his knights perform all their deeds in the name of God; they ask God for help, give thanks to God, and swear by God – in short, they are on the verge of a serious breach of the Second Commandment. Time and again they run to the chapel and fall to their knees. Not only that, they even seek the holy counsel of the Archbishop of Canterbury – which is rather amusing in light of two facts: one geographical and one historical. Canterbury (Durovernum Cantiacorum) lies

a well-trodden path and simply completed the work of his predecessors. It is certain that among these predecessors were missionaries who, as far back as Roman times, set out for Britain and Scotland – such as the aforementioned St Ninian and St Columba.

namely in Kent, just a stone's throw from the Strait of Dover; in Arthur's time, this was Saxon territory, and if there was a temple there at the time, it was more likely dedicated to Wotan. And secondly: the first Archbishop of Canterbury was St Augustine, later the patron saint of England, and this did not happen until the year 601, a good half-century after Arthur's death at Camlann. But Augustine presided over a rather modest little church, as the famous cathedral was not built until 1017. And it was by no means Arthur who built it, but… the Saxons, or rather their descendants. It is quite possible that it stood on the site of the former temple of Wotan. For whilst the pagan Saxons defeated the (possibly) Christian Britons, they themselves were soon baptised – this time, however, not from Ireland but from Rome. According to a purely Roman rite, untainted by Celtic influence. And this is how it happened:

The baptism of the Saxons was initiated by Pope Gregory II. In the year 597, St Augustine (?–631) set out on a mission to Britain. This saint, the patron of England, should not be confused with the more famous St Augustine (354–430, the one after whom the Augustinians are named). Shortly after arriving on the island, St Augustine of England baptised Aethelbert, King of Kent (later canonised), and in 604 established bishoprics in Canterbury (the capital of Kent) and Rochester. In the same year, the kingdom of the East Saxons (Essex) was baptised and construction began on St Paul's Cathedral in London. In the year 625, Aethelbert's daughter from Christian Kent, Aethelborga, married Edwin, the still-pagan King of Northumbria, and persuaded him to be baptised – so successfully that he became a saint. Edwin's successor, King Oswald (604–642), was also canonised (after being murdered by his fellow countrymen, who disliked sanctimonious figures); together with Saints Aidan and Cuthbert, he strengthened Christianity in Northumbria and built the famous monastery at Lindisfarne, which still stands today.

But even the baptised Saxons did not forget their old gods. Tiu, Wotan, Thor and Freya have survived in the English language to this day – in the names of the days of the week: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday...

But, as has been said, this was already after Arthur's time – about half a century later. In Arthur's day, the Saxons were absolutely and utterly 'pagan'. And Arthur himself?

Another example of the piety of Arthur and his retinue, which we might find in *the Vulgate* and in Malory, is the fact that all important events and celebrations take place during church feasts or on their eves – Candlemas and Pentecost predominate. Agreed. That could undoubtedly have been the case, and probably was. Except that Candlemas, or more precisely: the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary – is the Celtic Imbolc, a festival marking the approaching end of winter, whilst Pentecost (the Day of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, a movable spring feast) is the Celtic mystery of Beltaine, a celebration of nature in full spring bloom. Imbolc and Beltaine, as well as Samhain (late November, or All Saints' Day) and Lammas (Lughnasadh, early August, or Our Lady of the Snows Day), hold symbolic significance in Celtic legends – most of the fateful mythological and legendary events take place on these very days. That is why (regardless of the actual date of the coronation) Arthur, in the original songs of the Welsh bards, becomes king during the Beltaine mystery. The pagan mystery of Beltaine, however, was transformed by missionaries into Pentecost. We are familiar with this – it is the 'source-based' method, patented by Saint Columba.

Well, some might say, perhaps Malory went a bit over the top with the archbishop, perhaps he confused Canterbury with Glastonbury, perhaps he mixed up church festivals and pagan rites. But in stating that the valiant knight was devout, Malory did not exaggerate. And even if he did exaggerate a little, he had his reasons, for Malory looked back with nostalgia on the days when righteous and devout knights roamed beautiful, happy, sun-drenched Albion on their steeds...

Oh, how he longed for those days. He longed for them. He had his reasons.

The ideal of the righteous knight

I have already mentioned that **Le Morte D'Arthur** was written during the era of despondency brought upon England by the bloody civil war between the Yorks and the Lancasters. Malory described righteous, noble knights because the horror of the War of the Roses was unfolding before his very eyes: regicide, assassination, execution on the scaffold and murder on the battlefield, venality and treachery, the desecration of the corpses of defeated enemies, the breaking of words of honour, pacts and the laws of war, the violation of the right of asylum in churches, and unimaginable cruelty.

Things were no better in the era when Chrétien de Troyes' ballads, the *Vulgate* Cycle and the German epics were being composed. War and crime raged across continental Europe. Popes gouged out the eyes of antipopes and ordered the maimed to be paraded through the city so that everyone might see. In the south of France, the massacres of the Albigensians claimed hundreds of thousands of victims and turned Provence and Languedoc into a smouldering wasteland, utterly destroying the magnificent culture of that region. The whole of Central Europe was transformed into a seething cauldron, in which the armies of the Pope, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, the Germans and the English, Frederick Barbarossa, Philip of Swabia and God knows who else swirled in turn and alternately. These armies fought one another, but it was the people of the villages and towns who faced the real horror.

There was a spiritual antidote to these atrocities – the idealised image of a righteous knight, without blemish or fault, with a reliquary on his chest and God in his heart. A knight who prays before battle and spends the whole night after battle in the chapel, lying prostrate. Who honours a defeated enemy, does not raise a hand against the defenceless, and does not harm a woman or a child... John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, and before them Bernard of Clairvaux, called for knights to be precisely like this. And much earlier, Gildas – whom we already know – railed against unworthy, rowdy knights; he dedicated his work to them, for they were 'the ruin of Britain', as stated in the title of his work.

Gildas, however, had a slightly different type of knight in mind. In his day, knighthood was viewed quite differently in Britain. The medieval knight, along with the knightly code, customs and ceremonial, are elements entirely foreign to the original version of the Arthurian legend. These elements were only introduced by subsequent adaptations, made after the invasion and conquest of the Island by William the Conqueror. In these adaptations, the concept is turned on its head. Arthur's warriors cease to be Celtic patriots, heroes fighting for a national cause, striving to save the country from the onslaught of a foreign, invading Saxon culture. They become universal knights, and the idea is turned on its head – Arthur's warriors are not knights because the country is in need, but the reverse: they fight because they must – they are knights, and a knight – if he is a good knight – must be obedient to the will of God, his lord, and the commands of the sacred, chivalric law. His nationality and personal views are of no consequence whatsoever. He is to be a good knight. End of story.

And at the behest of Bernard of Clairvaux, a series of tales *from the Vulgate* was written about 'good knights'; trouvères and troubadours composed romances about such men. But they had to resort to legends and myths in doing so, because in reality such knights did not exist. A knight from the Yorkist or Lancastrian army, a knight of Barbarossa or Philip of Swabia, a knight from Tewkesbury or Bosworth, from Legnano or Bouvines, was, as a rule, a dull and arrogant butcher. And Simon de Montfort, the knight who set out on the Albigensian Crusade, was a common criminal. A genocidal maniac.

Romances were written about knights to whom oppressed ladies would bring pleas for help and receive that help – for in reality, at the sight of the approaching knights, the entire population – and the ladies first and foremost – would flee in panic into the woods. Stories were written of loyal vassals, of knights whose word could be relied upon, whilst in reality betrayal and treachery were fundamental elements of strategy and tactics. Knights were described as pious and devout, but in reality…

In the year 1170, Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, thundered from the pulpit against the so-called Clarendon Constitutions, proclaimed by King Henry II Plantagenet, which restricted the privileges of the Church. The king complained about the insolent priest before his loyal knights, exclaiming, and I quote: *'Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?* Four of the king's knights – Reginald Fitzurse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard Brito – correctly understood and interpreted this cry and a knight's duties towards his suzerain: shortly after Christmas, on 29 December, the archbishop was murdered on the steps of the altar.

In 1208, the knighted crusaders of Sir Simon de Montfort capture the town of Béziers in Languedoc, one of the centres of the 'heretical' Cathars, or Albigensians. One of the knights asks the papal legate overseeing the operation, Arnold Amaury, how to distinguish 'our own' from the 'heretics'. 'Kill them all,' came the reply, 'God will recognise his own sheep.' Fifteen thousand people were murdered – mostly women and children.

In 1327, King Edward II of England is dethroned and imprisoned in Berkeley Castle. To those who overthrew him – his wife, Isabella, her favourite Mortimer, and Orleton, the Bishop of Winchester – the living ex-king is an inconvenience. Two knights of noble birth – Baron John Maltravers and Sir Thomas Gournay – are given an order: Edward must die, but there must be no signs of a violent death on his body. The loyal knights Maltravers and Gournay murder the king by thrusting a red-hot rod into his rectum.

In the year 1369, Edward, known as the Black Prince, grandson of Edward II—who was murdered at Berkeley Castle—and the hero of countless chivalric tales for children, described by Froissart* as the noblest and most worthy knight—

* Jean Froissart (1337–1410), French poet and historian, author of, amongst other works, **Chronique de France, d'Angleterre, d'Ecosse et de Bretagne***. He gathered material for his history of contemporary wars from eyewitnesses to the events he described.

The kingdom that has existed since the time of King Arthur is at war with France. Having captured the city of Limoges, the chivalrous Black Prince spares the lives and grants freedom to all the knights taken captive. After all, he is bound by a code that commands solidarity with the brotherhood of knights. The remaining defenders and inhabitants of Limoges (numbering six thousand, including women and children) are massacred.

In June 1426, the nobility of Thuringia, Saxony, Meissen and Lusatia, heeding the call of Pope Martin V, set out on a great crusade. No, not to the Holy Land. Closer to home. Just across the border, to Bohemia, to convert the followers of Jan Hus's teachings by the sword. In the town of Teplice, the noble crusaders stormed a Benedictine convent, raped and murdered the Catholic nuns, and then plundered everything – including liturgical objects.

In 1427, the knight Stefan de Vignolles, known by the nickname La Hire, one of the commanders in Joan of Arc's army, turns to the chaplain to ask for absolution before an attack on the English. He refuses to go to confession, as he has neither the time nor the inclination for it. 'Then at least say a prayer,' suggests the priest. And La Hire, without dismounting from his horse, raises his eyes to the heavens. 'Lord God,' he shouts, 'I demand that you help me in battle! On the basis of reciprocity! Because if you were La Hire and I were you, I would support you!'

Just a few examples. But typical ones. Very typical ones.

And yet, in our times, the word 'knight' invariably carries positive connotations – we speak of chivalry and chivalrous behaviour, a knight's word, a knightly spirit. We had knightly circles in the old cavalry regiments and in the old Sejm, the School of Chivalry... and Mr Wołodyjowski, the Little Knight. To this day, an officer becomes a knight when struck with a sabre on his epaulettes during a promotion ceremony. A recipient of the Virtuti Militari order becomes a knight (*chevalier*); a young man who, in a chivalrous, polite and courtly manner, courted a young lady and acted as her guardian and protector was also a knight. And it was the Sleeping Knights who awaited the Day of Great Need in the Tatra Mountains. We are also very familiar – our history has ensured this – with the concept of a 'knightly death'.

A multitude of people will gather round your statue,
And these words will be preserved on the hard stones:
'Here lies a knight who fought without fear
And lived without blemish'.

Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz

As for that proverbial 'knight without fear or reproach' (*chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*), it is worth noting that the first historical bearer of such a title was the famous French knight Arnold Wilhelm de Barbazon (1360–1431), and the second – even more famous – was Pierre du Terrail, known as Bayard (1473–1524).

So, one might ask, what were these knights really like? If they were indeed as dreadful as the author claims, then where did these chivalric elements find their way into our culture and our language – and into virtually every language in the world?*

My answer is: they found their way here from chivalric tales – and above all from the Arthurian myth, reworked in a universally European style. They found their way here

* Interestingly, in our culture and language in particular, another type of chivalry remains strongly present – the figure of the knight with the black cross from the Teutonic Order, whose deeds were so much closer to the historical truth about knights. The Teutonic Knight from Malbork (who in reality was probably not at all demonic and scarcely worse than other knights) has, however, become a convenient contrast in our culture, the opposite pole of the ideal. In Sienkiewicz's work, we read:

'I have often seen how a righteous knight spares another who is weaker, saying to himself: "I shall gain no honour if I trample on one who lies prostrate." And the Teutonic Knight, at that very moment, is the most relentless...'

A similar situation has arisen with German culture and language. Here, alongside 'chivalrous deed' (*Rittertat*) and 'chivalrous behaviour' (*ritterliches Benehmen*), the word and concept *of Raubritter* is also in use. This was the name given to a nobleman of noble birth and knighted status who engaged – for profit – in plunder and murder. It was precisely these historically real knights who were the scourge and terror of Germany in the 13th–14th centuries – the period when the Arthurian myth was at the height of its popularity.

not only to literature, poetry and everyday language, but also to history. For the extremely few examples of chivalrous behaviour, confirmed beyond all doubt by historical records, date from a time when the legend of Arthur and his faithful companions from Camelot was already widely known and popular. The few 'good knights' simply sought to emulate their literary ideals. As a rule, they confined themselves to appearing at tournaments in the guise of 'Lancelot', 'Tristan' or 'Gawain' and adorning their helmets with the sashes and ribbons of their 'Guinevere's' and 'Isolde's'. In everyday life – and especially in war – the situation regarding the emulation of these ideals was far worse.

The Arthurian myth, in its successive phases of development, did not merely signify nostalgia for the good old days of yore, when truly good, loyal and pious knights still walked the earth. The myth did not lament the decadence of chivalric culture. There was nothing to lament, for – as many historians argue – one can speak of the decadence of chivalric culture from the very moment of the emergence of chivalry and its culture in general. In reality, the myth went much further: it created a chivalric utopia. It created an entirely fictional ideal. The ideal of a knight who never existed.

Both of these issues came to the fore, as mentioned, when the Celtic myth began to vie for a prominent place in European culture, when it began to become universal. This universality – interestingly enough – failed, however, to erase the traces of Celtic heritage that survived in every version of the legend, even the most distorted and modernised ones.

The parodic aspect of the myth

Arthur was a Celt. Through and through, from time immemorial. What is more, Arthur was an idealised Celt. He simply had to be. Anyone who fails to grasp this will never understand the legend.

I have already mentioned Celtic festivals and rituals, and I have already spoken of Welsh mythology; we shall return to its references to certain heroes and figures when we turn to the legendary *'who's who*'. For now, however, let us turn our attention to certain key principles of Celtic culture – those relating directly to the central figure of the legend – King Arthur. Arthur, who was the ruler of the Celts.

Even in this most familiar – and at the same time most distorted – version of the myth, several phenomena and facts are sure to give us pause for thought. Take this, for instance: why must Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, rely on Merlin's magic to draw the sword from the stone? Why do clan leaders gather at a council to determine who will become the supreme leader? Even if the throne is not hereditary, why does the strongest or richest not simply seize power?

This is because the exercise of power among the Celts was understood and enforced in a manner unique amongst the societies of that time. The king (tribal chieftain) did not own the land – the land was communal; it belonged to everyone. The ruler received his authority as a trust – he governed on behalf of the people, not in his own name. This is very important – for to us, who accept the myth in its medieval (European medieval) form, Arthur appears as a sovereign king, his knights as vassals or feudal lords, and the people of the Land of Logres as subjects. Nothing could be further from the truth. A Celtic ruler could not inherit or seize power, nor could he exercise it absolutely. Power was entrusted to him by universal consensus, and in exercising it, the ruler was obliged to be guided by the good of the country and its people. This 'good' was understood as the good of the land – under a good ruler, the country, that is, the land in the literal sense, was healthy and happy, flourishing and productive, whereas a crisis of power or the chaos of an interregnum meant crop failure, famine and other plagues. When a ruler's reign was ailing, the land fell ill. A poorly governed country (a theme that recurred frequently in later literature) turned into the Barren Land, *La Terre Gaste, The Wasted Land* (Eliot).

In mythologies and legends across the world, there is the motif of the heroic king who, through his heroic deeds, gains the acceptance of his entire people – and to whom the whole people, in recognition of these merits and personal qualities, entrust power. So that he may rule in such a way that the people may prosper as much as possible. However, throughout the world, such legends served merely as a psychological antidote to the reality of actual rulers and their conduct. To the realisation that a king reigns because he has inherited the throne or seized it by force, and that the land is his property, which he may dispose of freely and without restriction. He rules over his subjects by the very nature of their subjection and because he holds the apparatus of coercion in his hands. He ceases to rule when he dies, or when someone – most often another king – overthrows him.

Such legends also exist amongst the Celts – but they are grounded in tradition and actual facts. The Celtic king received his authority in trust – because he was a hero. Because his actual deeds and merits made him worthy of being entrusted with power. The Celtic king owed a duty of service to the people and the land – nothing more. His orders were obeyed when he deserved to be obeyed. Power conferred no further rights – in particular, it did not grant the right to land ownership or the right to dispose of that land. The land was the common property of all Celts. Once this is understood, it is easier to comprehend the fierce resistance that the Welsh, Irish and Scots put up against the Norman and English feudal lords over the centuries. The feudal system of governance that the Normans and English sought to impose on the Welsh, Irish and Scottish Celts turned their entire Celtic world upside down.

That is why Arthur is hailed as the king of all Britons and the hope of the nation. That is why he is the foremost hero amongst heroes; that is why he, and no one else, draws the sword from the stone. It is he, like the god Lleu, who receives the sword Excalibur—a symbol of power—from the Lady of the Lake (the goddess Arianrod). That is why, like the hero Cuchulainn, who single-handedly defended Ulster against the entire army of Queen Medb of Connacht, Arthur, at Badon, slays nearly a thousand Saxons with his own hands in defence of his country.

It goes without saying that Cuchulainn alone could not have taken on an entire army, nor could Arthur have slain a thousand Saxons single-handedly. It is a legend. A legend expressing the Celtic longing for a heroic king, for an invincible god-king, armed by a goddess (the Great Mother, symbol of the earth) with a magical sword. For a king accepted by the Earth itself, whom – as the trustee of the people's will – he would defend with dignity. For a king accepted by all and uniting everyone. For a king under whose rule the land would flourish and be happy, bountiful, healthy...

Of course, no such king ever existed. It is a myth. A myth that arose at a time when the world of the British Celts was already crumbling to rubble under the blows of foreign invaders. At a time when it became clear just how feeble and naïve Celtic democracy was in the face of harsh feudalism...

The myth of King Arthur.

An unattainable Celtic ideal. Well, little remains of the Celts. But the ideal remains. For it was – unlike the Celts themselves – indestructible.

And the legend remains.

For exactly the same reason.

The Grail – the ultimate mystery

'Towards evening, a wealthy man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus, came forward. He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate then ordered that it be handed over. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb, which he had had hewn out of the rock. He rolled a large stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away" (Matthew 27:57–60).

Well, the thing is, Joseph didn't leave. Yes, yes, I know that all the other Gospel writers – John, Luke and Mark, as well as the apocryphal Nicodemus – all agree with Matthew. That he left, and that's that; only the two Marys remained at the tomb – Mary Magdalene and Mary, the wife of Clopas. But we do, after all, know the Arthurian legend!

Joseph of Arimathea did not leave the tomb. Christ appeared to Joseph, alive, and blood was flowing from his wound, the one inflicted by the spear of the Roman centurion Longinus. Joseph took a vessel and collected the last drops of the Saviour's blood into it. And only then did he depart, leaving Jerusalem, travelling to the city of Sarras, and from there sailing to Britain. It was through him (Joseph) that the entire pagan population of that land converted to the Christian faith. The vessel into which the drops of the truest blood, the royal blood (*le sang réal, Sangréal, Gréal, Grail, Graal*), had been collected vanished from this world; it was hidden away, and Joseph's descendants became the hereditary guardians of the Mystery. The Grail vanished, but the wise Merlin had prophesied that it would one day return. And the Grail did return...

As we already know, Chrétien de Troyes was the first to allude to the Grail. However, Chrétien did not finish his romance, which is probably why there is not a single word in it about Christ or Joseph of Arimathea. Not a single word. We do not know what the Grail is; in Chrétien's work, the Grail remains a mystery. And one more thing – the mysterious vessel in Chrétien's work is a bowl or platter (*éscuelle*), a vessel used during feasts.

The whole matter resurfaces in the religious version of the legend – in Robert de Boron's work (*Joseph d'Arimathie*). There we find the full story of Joseph of Arimathea, the blood collected in a vessel (which, in Boron's account, becomes a chalice for the first time – the very one from which Christ drank at the Last Supper), Joseph's exodus to Britain, the passing down of the Grail amongst Joseph's descendants right up to the last of them, the one who becomes the Fisher King, guardian of the secret of the miraculous vessel until the arrival of the rightful successor...

Whether Robert de Boron was the first to imbue the Arthurian myth with a religious character, or whether the Church had already attempted to co-opt King Arthur and the Grail for its own purposes, we do not know. Nor do we know how Gospel elements crept into the Celtic legend, which is undoubtedly a mixture of mythology, tradition and actual historical events concerning attempts to halt Saxon expansion in Britain. Ro-

Bert de Boron (like Chrétien, for that matter) refers to sources known only to himself and secret books which enabled him to uncover the true story of the Gospel's Joseph of Arimathea and the miraculous vessel associated with the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Such mysterious sources are a motif as old as time in literature, always alive and always in vogue – not so long ago we spoke of the 'Britonica', which Geoffrey of Monmouth used in compiling *his Historia Regum*.... And then there was James Macpherson and his fabricated *'Odes of Ossian*'. The 'secret books' and 'mysterious documents' from which Robert de Boron learnt the truth about the Holy Grail can therefore safely be placed in the same category – which did not prevent them from subsequently being used to draw breathtaking inferences and conclusions."

Robert's work was taken up by the Cistercians in the *Vulgate* Cycle, a work which, as I mentioned earlier, was most likely inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux whilst he was still alive. And here everything becomes clear. There are no secret sources. There is politics. And nothing else.

Interestingly, the chalice invented by Robert de Boron disappears in *the Vulgate*; the Grail once again becomes a bowl, as in Chrétien's work. The rest (i.e. the nature and origin of the Grail) is essentially identical. However, as has already been said, the monks introduce into the narrative a character who had never appeared anywhere before – their pure invention – Galahad.

* Among these is, for example, the theory put forward by M. Baigent, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln in their book **The Holy Grail and the Holy Blood**, according to which Christ was not crucified at all, but fled to Europe with the help of Joseph of Arimathea(!) and his wife (!!!) Mary Magdalene. The Grail is therefore the actual 'blood' – a line, a dynasty, whose secret was guarded by the Druids, the Merovingians, the Albigensians, the Templars, the Rosicrucians, the Freemasons… The only ones missing are the Jews and cyclists. Sorry, the Jews are there – to prove that some *Rex Mundi*, a descendant and heir of Christ, is still waiting for the day when he will take power over the world, the authors constantly quote *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Eco thoroughly ridiculed this theory in **Foucault's Pendulum*.*

The son of Lancelot, born of the virgin Elaine, daughter of King Pelles, granddaughter of King Pellam the Rich Fisherman. Galahad, the ideal knight, a direct descendant of Joseph of Arimathea.

The *Vulgate* Cycle (the section entitled **La Queste del Saint Graal**) states that the Grail appeared in Camelot on the very day Galahad arrived at court, on Whit Sunday. It happened during supper after evening prayers. There was a clap of thunder, the sky brightened, and behold, before the eyes of those gathered, a vessel covered by a veil appeared, carried by invisible hands. 'The palace,' we read, 'was filled with the most exquisite fragrances in the world.' And on the tables before the knights 'appeared the finest meats, and each had before him whatever he desired'. And the Grail vanished – just as suddenly as it had appeared.

The initiator of the Great Quest is (in *the Vulgate* and in Malory) the person one would least expect – not Galahad, not Perceval, not Arthur, but… Gawain. It is Gawain who proposes to unravel the Great Mystery, to reveal what lay hidden beneath the Veil. 'Let each of us,' Gawain calls out, 'take a knightly vow that the very next day you will set out on a quest that will last one year and one day…'

King Arthur is terrified – the Cistercians in *the Vulgate* clearly suggest that the king already knows: the end of an era is approaching. Here comes *the Götterdämmerung*, the twilight of the gods. Those other gods. And other idols – other ideals, different from those established by the Lateran Councils. The ladies are also terrified – the sinful and wicked daughters of Eve. They too know that the days of silks are over, the days of *amour courtois* are over; now there will be rosaries, kneelers and hair shirts.

Admittedly, a few ladies also wish to take a vow and set out on the Quest, but the old hermit Nacien, present in Camelot, thunders in a mighty voice that it would be blasphemy and a mortal sin for such vile creatures to seek the Grail. Male knights, even if they are not without sin, can purify themselves through confession, but confession will be of no help to women. The daughters of Eve are impure and shall remain so for ever. How could they ever hope to attain the Grail!

So the ladies stay behind, and the knights set off. The Round Table company ceases to exist. Nothing else matters. The threats to the realm – evil giants and dragons, robber barons and bandits, Saxons, Irish and Picts – are worldly matters, not worth worrying about. The knights set out in search of the Grail. Each rides alone – they decide to go their separate ways. Each chooses his own path.

And leading the way is that one man, the most worthy and the purest – Galahad, conceived specifically for this purpose. And the reader already knows – of all the paths chosen by the knights, the one and only, the true one, the one leading to the goal – is Galahad's path.

Who is Galahad?

Joseph Campbell traces the name Galahad back to the biblical Gilead. According to Scripture, Gilead is admittedly not a person, but a fertile land in Transjordan – yet it is a symbolic place, a testament to harmony and covenant (Genesis 31:47–52). Furthermore, Campbell believes that the explanation for the name Galahad lies in the biblical phrase: *'Numquid resina non est in Galaad?'*, meaning 'Is there no balm in Gilead?' (Book of Jeremiah, 8:22). The Arthurian Galahad was thus intended in the *Vulgate* Cycle to be both a symbol of the covenant and a balm, a remedy for ailments and all evil. The Paraclete. The Comforter and Saviour.

Campbell also sees the inspiration for the Cistercian authors of the *Vulgate* Cycle in the decisions taken at the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Innocent III in 1215. This council, apart from issuing an official call for a murderous crusade against the Albigensians and Waldensians, also defined the following dogma: during Holy Mass, at the elevation of the host and the chalice, Christ is present. Truly present. In body and blood. He is at once both priest and sacrifice: *'In qua idem ipse sacerdos, et sacrificium Iesus Christus, cuius corpus et sanguis in sacramento altaris sub speciebus panis et vini veraciter contentur...'*

And yet another dogma was adopted at the Fourth Lateran Council. A dogma that remains to this day: There is only one faith and one Church. Only one. And only one,

There is but one true path, and to stray from it is to face eternal damnation. *Una vero est fidelium universalis ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur...*

There is only one path: the path of Galahad. And there is only one Grail.

Thus, the Grail and Christ are one and the same. To find the Grail after a long, dangerous and arduous journey is to sail through life, steering clear of the reefs of sin. Avoiding temptation, yet unafraid of suffering, to triumph in spirit over the frail flesh and the sinful, impermanent matter of this world. To possess the Grail is to attain salvation. To climb Mount Montsalvat to become *salvatur*. To fulfil the mystery. To cross the threshold.

Why did the monks invent Galahad? And why did they make him the son of Lancelot, who is, after all, the most sinful of sinners, for he remains in an illicit relationship with Guinevere? Even when he conceives Galahad with Elaine, he believes he is making love to the queen, another man's wife. Galahad is therefore a child of sin and transgression! Lancelot succumbs to lust, a mortal sin, and covets his neighbour's wife. To make matters worse, that neighbour is the king, the lord, the suzerain. Lancelot breaks one of the holiest commandments of a medieval knight – he commits treason against his suzerain. Why, then, does *the Vulgate* make Galahad the son of Lancelot, an adulterer and a faithless man?

A son, a child, symbolises rebirth, a new beginning. Rebirth in a better, ideal form – the form we might have taken had life not corrupted us. And more than that – a son is the atonement for sins. For the monks of *the Vulgate*, Galahad is not merely a reincarnation – he is the atonement for Lancelot's sins. Lancelot, who once bore the name Galahad, before abandoning it for *a* secular and worldly *nom de guerre*. Galahad is what Lancelot might have been, if only…

Lancelot, of course, does not find the Grail, though he searches for it intensely. He cannot, because… he is still the sinful Lancelot, not the pure Galahad. Gawain and Lionel also fail – because they remain proud, because they are still arrogant, because they are still preoccupied with the affairs of this world rather than spiritual ideals. Because they are still ordinary, not ideal, knights.

Grail is finally found by three pure and sinless figures: Galahad, Perceval and Bors. But Perceval and Bors – despite their purity (in the sexual sense), despite being righteous knights – can be nothing more than Galahad's companions in *the Vulgate*. Even Perceval, who after all was the one who found the Grail in all earlier versions, takes a back seat in *the Vulgate*. Why? Because there can only be one. There is only one path. Galahad, and no one else – this is a warning to all the Albigensians of this world. *Una vero est fidelium universalis ecclesia!*

Having attained the Highest Goal, Galahad, together with the miraculous vessel, departs from this sinful vale for ever. Perceval casts off his armour, becomes a hermit and soon dies. Only Bors returns to Camelot, to convey to Arthur the message of the Cistercians and *the Vulgate*: with the Grail, hope has departed. The symbol and the centre of the spirit have vanished – and without the spirit, the temporal world, the world of chivalry, the world of Arthur – these worlds must crumble into dust and ashes...

The Grail – like almost every element of the Arthurian legend – has its origins in Celtic mythology. This is an absolutely certain fact, confirmed time and again. Like every Celtic element of the legend, it was subject to modifications designed to serve specific purposes. Each successive era added its own objectives – modern objectives, corresponding to the moral ideals of the time, or rather to the ideals of the group that considered itself ideal. The religious version of the myth predates the legend itself by over six hundred years. Can it, however, be claimed that the religious version is, for this reason, better and more moral than the Celtic version, simply because culture and civilisation had matured by six hundred years by the time *the Vulgate* was compiled? Does modifying and modernising a myth always necessarily mean enriching it or ennobling the ideas contained within it?

The ideals of Christianity, instilled into the Arthurian legend on the initiative of Bernard of Clairvaux, are today regarded as noble and lofty – and the Christian Grail

(invariably in the form of a chalice or goblet) has taken a prominent place in contemporary culture as a symbol of a sacred and supreme ideal. One must not, however, forget that such an exegesis of the myth had a very specific purpose – both moral and political – at the time the *Vulgate* Cycle was being written. Firstly, it was necessary to wage a merciless battle against the ideals *of amour courtois*, which clashed with the asceticism advocated by the Church and its systematic aversion to all forms of worldly – and especially physical – love. For *'amour courtois'* was to the Church what the Vendée later became to the French Revolution and Napoleon – a rebellion and a resistance. *'Amour courtois'* blasphemously suggested that love for a woman could drive a man just as strongly as love for God. According to the canons *of amour courtois*, a knight renders chivalrous service to the lady of his heart; he is her vassal – treating the lady – that vessel of sin – on a par with the king, the suzerain, God's anointed one. It is unthinkable!

Interestingly, of all the versions of the legend, *the Vulgate* is the most explicit and literal when it comes to matters of carnal love. The work simply oozes with sex and eroticism. Where Malory confines himself (in his descriptions of women) to stating: 'She was a most beautiful maiden', *the Vulgate* does not hesitate to inform us that: 'her shapely breasts, small, snow-white and firm, rose beneath her gown like hard little apples'. Malory (speaking, for example, of Lancelot and Guinevere) delicately states: 'Whether they were in bed together that night or not, I do not know and dare not say; for bear in mind that in those days love took a different form than it does today'. In similar situations in *the Vulgate*, the pair of lovers, 'having lain down naked and clung tightly to one another', 'amuse themselves delightfully with one another', 'speak sweetly to one another', and so on. Undoubtedly, this stems from the same source as the whole witch-hunt against sex unleashed by the Church – from the irrepressible carnal desires burning within the pious brothers and sisters of religious orders, who had been driven mad by asceticism and celibacy.

Or perhaps the pious monks were aware that the goal they wished to achieve required… some titillating content? Or perhaps their

The message is as follows: if you must, it is better to 'live it up in style' than to serve as a vassal. Better to run about naked for a while and have some fun, rather than die for love and worship a woman from afar, a woman who is unworthy of such adoration...

The second aim of the ecclesiastical version was as follows: it was necessary to rein in chivalry and its ideals – and, in the absence of such ideals, to create them. A knight was to cease thinking about mundane trifles – from the moment of his knighthood, which (in the later version, from the 11th century onwards) took on the character of a religious initiation, he was to wait in peace and pious contemplation for the crowning moment of his life. He was to await the moment when the Grail would reveal itself – in the form, for example, of a call to a crusade*.

It must be admitted that the Church acted shrewdly – it did not excommunicate the legend nor did it thunder from the pulpit. Instead, it created and circulated its own version of the myth – one powerful and appealing enough to the public to supplant the previous ones. A religious version, which in some respects remains authoritative and classic to this day.

This classic status, however, is strongly challenged by another version of the Quest for the Grail: Wolfram von Eschenbach's version. A version that must be regarded as rebellious – today we would call it dissident. Wolfram von Eschenbach also features in *La Vendée*, aligning himself with Chrétien de Troyes and the troubadours – against Robert de Boron – and the (later) Cistercians.

In Wolfram's version, the Grail is… a stone. Not a bowl, not a chalice, not a cup, not a communion chalice, but a stone. True, not an ordinary one, but a miraculous one – the very sight of this stone bestows eternal youth; thanks to it, the rejuvenated phoenix rises from the ashes. But the-

* Bernard of Clairvaux proclaims the Order of the Knights Templar – the Militia of God, ready to fight in defence of the faith at a moment's notice – to be the ideal, the model to be emulated, and the apotheosis of chivalry and all Christian virtues. This takes place in the year 1128. Less than two hundred years later, in 1307, these ideal knights, accused of witchcraft, sodomy, demon worship, blasphemy and heresy, howl in agony in the torture chambers and burn at the stake throughout the length and breadth of France.

(philosophical?) is not a chalice – the stone removes from the story its liturgical subtext and connections with the Eucharist. The stone is much closer to the Kabbalah...*

In Wolfram's version, there is no Galahad. There is no *'chevalier sans peur et sans reproche'* who is born and becomes a knight for one purpose alone. There is only Parsifal – and Parsifal is not an ideal. Parsifal, however, wishes to be one and strives towards it.

Wolfram von Eschenbach, as I mentioned, was himself a valiant knight, a triumphant contestant in jousting tournaments. It is easier to understand his dissenting approach to the religious version of the legend if we recall that the Church had attempted on several occasions to push through a ban on holding tournaments. Wolfram the knight has a different understanding of chivalric ideals.

The romance of Wolfram, a valiant knight who knows how to enjoy life, exudes a zest for life and optimism. Parsifal, by winning the Grail, comes to understand the essence and beauty of life.

* Wolfram von Eschenbach (following in the footsteps of his predecessors) also refers to 'secret sources'. *Parzival* is said to have been based on information received from Guiot de Provins, a troubadour with close ties to the Knights Templar. Guiot, in turn, is said to have drawn his knowledge of the Grail from the masters of the famous Kabbalistic school in Toledo, particularly from the Jewish astronomer and sage Flagetanis.

The dissident nature of Wolfram's work is evident in one further respect: the Grail is hidden on Mount Munsalvaesche, or Montsalvat. It is believed that Montsalvat is Montségur, the last stronghold of the Albigensians, whose capture and the massacre that followed in 1244 marked the end of the heresy in Languedoc. This reference (as well as elements of mystical and obscure symbolism in **Parzival**) is regarded as clear evidence of Wolfram's fascination with the Manichaean and Cathar schisms. Another fact that might corroborate this is that the guardians of the Grail on Mount Montsalvat are the Knights Templar, whom Pope Innocent III had already sharply rebuked in Wolfram's time for favouring the Cathars, whilst not refraining from alluding to the 'witchcraft' spreading within the Order (the bull **De insolentia Templariorum**). The years 1200–1220, during which Wolfram was writing **Parzival**, dictated that any allusions to both the Albigensians and the Templars should be strictly avoided. Wolfram did not do so. I shall not speculate on why this happened, for I fear (following the example of Baigent and Co.) of getting bogged down in some conspiracy theory of history.

He comes to understand the essence of humanism. Parsifal unravels the mystery so that he may heal Amfortas, the Fisher King, of his suffering. Parsifal does not depart this world with the Grail; he remains so that now, having attained the highest spiritual value (which, in Wolfram's work, the Grail never ceases to be), he may enjoy life twofold. Wolfram's message is this: let us not wait for a revelation or a command from on high; let us not wait for any *'Deus vult*'. Let us seek the Grail within ourselves. For the Grail is nobility, it is love for one's neighbour, it is the capacity for compassion. True chivalric ideals, towards which it is worth and necessary to seek the right path, to fight one's way through the wild forest, where, to quote, 'there is neither road nor path'. Everyone must find their own path. But it is not true that there is only one path. There are many. An infinite number.

Parsifal feels compassion for the Fisher King. Parsifal is a jester who knows one thing – the King is suffering. As you will recall, this story of the Fool is told by one fool, Parry, to another fool, Jack Lucas, whilst the two of them lie on the grass in Central Park in the dead of night, trying to dispel the clouds in the sky through sheer force of will. And later, when one of these fools is suffering, fading away in a coma on a bed in a New York clinic, the other risks his life to obtain the Grail. A cup bearing the inscription: *'To Lannie Carmichael, Christmas 1932'.* It is not the inscription that matters. What matters is humanity. The heart.

Indeed, whilst I appreciate the intentions, I prefer the humanism of Wolfram von Eschenbach and Terry Gilliam to the idiosyncrasies of embittered Cistercian scribes and Bernard of Clairvaux...

The years passed, culture continued to 'mature', and the Arthurian myth evolved, serving successive purposes. I shall speak of one such purpose with the utmost reluctance, solely out of a sense of duty to do so; truly, I must 'close my eyes and think of England'. For it so happened that, nearly eight hundred years after the creation of *the Vulgate* Cycle, Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler attempted to adapt the myth of Arthur and the Round Table to the ideology and code of his black knights of the SS. And Hitler (a historically confirmed fact, not taken from an Indiana Jones film) commissioned

a special group to conduct a search in the Pyrenees and Languedoc for Mount Monsalvat and the Grail*.

The miraculous vessel from the legend of King Arthur was to serve the brown-skinned heirs of the Nibelungs and the 'Aryan' chivalric tradition as *a Wunderwaffe* against 'perfidious Albion'! The Grail was thus to be used as a weapon against the Celts...

The Celts, who invented the Grail.

The source, prototype and archetype of the Grail – though this may sound like sacrilege to adherents of the canonical version of the legend – are quite clearly legendary Celtic artefacts. In most cases – cauldrons.

A miraculous cauldron, usually the property of a god or group of gods, features very frequently in Celtic folklore. The Irish god Dagda, one of the sons of the goddess Danu, possessed a cauldron called Undry. Each of Dagda's guests found in the cauldron food commensurate with their own merits and deeds. Righteous heroes and the bravest of warriors fished the most delicious, finest morsels from the cauldron. No one ever left Undry hungry. Everyone found in the cauldron – I recall here the text *of the Vulgate* – 'exquisite meats, and each had before him just what he desired'. Do you need further examples? Here you are:

The hero Cuchulainn, during his heroic expedition to Dún Scaith, the City of Shadows, won from the gods of Darkness a marvellous cauldron in which meat could never run out.

And in British and Welsh mythology? The god Brân possessed a cauldron which – just like the Grail later on – restored vitality, healed the sick and even brought the dead back to life.

The goddess Ceridwen possessed a magical cauldron in which she brewed an elixir of wisdom and knowledge. The elixir was intended

* The searches and excavations in southern France were sponsored by Alfred Rosenberg himself, the leading expert on racial purity. It is interesting to consider how the fact that, according to Wolfram von Eschenbach, both 'German' (*echt Deutsch*) Grail knights, Parsifal and Lohengrin, being close relatives of Amfortas, the Fisher King, were direct descendants of Joseph of Arimathea, which meant that, according to Nazi standards, they had Jewish blood in their veins.

It was intended for the goddess's son, but by chance a young servant of Ceridwen, a boy named Gwion Bach, tasted it. The magical potion worked – when the boy grew up, he became famous as Taliesin, the greatest bard of Britain...

The god Pwyll, ruler of the land of Annwvyn, possessed a cauldron that did more than simply cook food – it was the Cauldron of Inspiration, Creativity and Poetry, studded with pearls, and thus held immense spiritual value for the Celts. No coward, no traitor, no perjurer, no liar could even come near Pwyll's cauldron… Does this not remind you of anything? It is the Holy Grail, the very spitting image!

In the Welsh legend, Pwyll's cauldron was hidden in the inaccessible, ever-turning castle of Caer Sidi – the obvious prototype for the Fisher King's castle and Mount Monsalvat. Many heroes tried to claim it, but in the Welsh legend it was none other than the hero amongst heroes, the bravest and most worthy of all, the Celt amongst Celts – King Arthur himself, aided by the bard Taliesin – who succeeded...

As we already know, the first continental discoverer of the Grail was Perceval, created by Chrétien de Troyes. Perceval, in turn, is derived from the mythical Welsh hero Peredur. And in Welsh mythology, Peredur, after long searches and wanderings, found a wondrous and mysterious object, which was… a severed, blood-dripping head on a platter, carried by two maidens. Scholars of the myth identify this macabre object with the head of the god Bran the Blessed (*see* Welsh mythology), which became an oracle and warned the Britons of enemy invasions. Scholars not only see in this head one of the earliest prototypes of the Grail – it is believed that the ancient Celts were in the habit of mummifying and then venerating severed heads and skulls – both those of enemies and of revered ancestors. The name of the fearsome god Cromm Cruach, worshipped in Ireland, translates as 'Bloody Head'. Thus, the culmination of Peredur's journey is the discovery of a 'sacred' artefact. Peredur witnesses a mystery…

Except that it is a Celtic mystery. One which, over time, has been 'reinterpreted' and suitably embellished. Read: falsified.

There is also another legend, clearly linked to the Quest for the Holy Grail. It is the famous tale, popular in Welsh mythology and recounted in one branch of the Mabinogion, of the hero Kulhwch's love for Olwen, a maiden so beautiful that wherever she trod, four white clovers would spring up (hence her name, meaning 'White Trace').

Unfortunately, Olwen was the daughter of the giant cyclops Hawthorn (Yspadden Penkawr), and according to a prophecy, the day she took a husband would mark the last day of her father's life. No wonder, then, that Yspadden viewed potential suitors with a sceptical eye – he would immediately strike each one on the head with his club. Olwen therefore remained unmarried, whilst Yspadden enjoyed good health and intended to live a long life.

Kulhwch, realising that he could not achieve much on his own, turned to King Arthur and his company for help. Before long, a whole band of 'matchmakers', armed to the teeth, appeared at Yspadden Penkawr's castle. Seeing what was afoot, Głóg resorted to a ruse. He laid down his conditions. 'All right,' he said, 'fine, Olwen will marry Kulhwch, but first you must pile up the wedding gifts here.' And he began to list those gifts…

The list was long and breathtaking – the giant demanded, in exchange for his daughter, the completion of a series of labours worthy of Heracles, as well as the delivery of an incredible number of magical items and artefacts, and obtaining even a single one of them was to be a feat requiring the superhuman effort of a whole group of heroes. But the group of heroes was, after all, at his beck and call...

A long and arduous *quest* – The Search – had begun. He had to fight giants, monsters, and even gods. Fortunately, the other gods lent a hand. Soon, Yspadden had almost everything he'd demanded – including (mark my words!) the marvellous Cauldron of Diwrnach, the only vessel capable of cooking a feast for a wedding banquet. Arthur's knights had secured everything – all that was missing were three magical items – a razor, a pair of scissors and a comb – hidden in the head of a gruesome beast – a giant boar known as Trwch Trwyth.

Arthur's entire team split into groups, and each group set off in a different direction across the world. For they needed further magical artefacts to defeat the boar. For a long, long time the knights wandered and had countless adventures, but at last they had gathered everything they needed. Now they could set about dealing with the boar – but no one knew where it was. To track it down, the knights split up once more and scattered to the four corners of the world...

The boar was tracked down and cornered in Ireland. Arthur himself fought it for nine days and nine nights, but he was no match for it. And Trwch Trwyth, furious beyond measure, sailed to Wales to wreak as much havoc as he could in the hunters' homeland.

They chased one another for a long time far and wide across the whole of Wales (the legend is terrifyingly accurate, but also devilishly long). More than one fine knight fell to the terrible, savage sabres, but at last Arthur, the god Manawyddan ap Llyr and a few other daredevils overpowered the boar in the currents of the River Hafren (today the Severn). The razor and the shears were wrenched from the beast's head by force. Before the comb could be taken from him, however, Trwch Trwyth broke free and fled to Cornwall...

The dangers (and the length of the description) of the chase through Cornwall dwarf the entire previous part of the legend. So let us cut a long story short: the boar was finally caught up with and his comb was taken from him, whilst Trwch Trwyth leapt into the waves and was never heard of again.

Arthur and the surviving knights returned to Yspad-den and showed him their spoils. Before the giant had time to marvel at them, they cut off his head, and Kulhwch took the beautiful Olwen as his wife before his father-in-law had even grown cold.

And what's the moral of the story?

Hmm… I wouldn't want to put forward the theory that the hunt for the great wild boar was the very prototype of the quest for the Grail. I don't want to be quite that trivial. I prefer – following Parnicki and Dante – to identify the Grail with the true goal of the great endeavour of mythical heroes. I prefer to identify the Grail with Olwen, from whose feet white clovers sprang as she walked. I prefer to identify the Grail with Lydia,

which Parry loved. *I like New York in June... How about you?*

Because I believe the Grail is a woman. To find her and win her over, to understand her, it's worth devoting a great deal of time and effort. And that is precisely the moral of the story.

The Mystery of Love

There is no heaven nor earth, no abyss nor hell.
There is only Beatrice. And yet she is not here.

Jan Lechoń

And therefore, all ye who are lovers, call to mind the month of May...

Sir Thomas Malory

The year is 1275. Florence. A certain Dante Alighieri, whilst out for a stroll, suddenly spots a nine-year-old girl wading in a stream. The girl is Beatrice Portinari, the daughter of a Florentine nobleman. The very young Beatrice sees the poet's eyes fixed upon her. She does not yet know that, at that very moment, everything has already been decided. She does not yet know that she will achieve immortality, that she will be famous throughout the world, and that her name will forever be associated with pure, sublime, perfect love. Beatrice Portinari does not yet know this. But Dante already does.

The Forest of Brocéliande. The wizard Merlin, whilst strolling, comes upon a clear spring, beside which sits a beautiful, black-haired girl. Merlin suddenly knows – with a terrifying certainty – that everything has already been decided. He knows that for this girl he will sacrifice everything: his magical powers, his fame, his duties to Arthur and Britain. 'Who are you, O fair one?' he asks. The girl lifts her violet eyes. 'I am Nimue,' she replies. 'You have just doomed yourself to me.'

It is *May*. Lancelot arrives at Arthur's court and sees Guinevere. Arthur's court and sees Guinevere...

Tristan arrives in Ireland and sees Isolde...

All the love literature in the world.

Camelot, the court of King Arthur. A day of celebration. For some – Pentecost. For others – the time of the Beltane mystery. Before the eyes of the Knights of the Round Table gathered in the throne room, the Holy Grail appears...

In the book mentioned above, Joseph Campbell argues that the appearance of the Grail before the eyes of Arthur's knights corresponds to a sense of*aesthetic arrest, of* rapture, precisely the kind experienced by Dante Alighieri at the sight of Beatrice wading in a stream. At this sight, a transformation took place within Dante (just as it did within the knights): the longings of his heart, hitherto mortally sensual and mundane, were sanctified by poetry. And Teodor Parnicki's book is entitled **Only Beatrice**. In this book, the following words are spoken:

'You will grow stronger, you will become the bravest of the brave, for the Grail is the source of power and courage, and the Grail of all Grails is truly – my femininity'.

There is only Beatrice. And yet she is not there. An enigma. A mystery.

All the love literature in the world.

The Grail is a woman.

But the words used by Teodor Parnicki are not spoken by a woman.

They are spoken by the Goddess.

For, as Marion Zimmer Bradley says in **The Mists of Avalon**, there are many gods and they have many names. But there is only one Goddess. The Great, White, Triple One. She who was, is, and will be.

The*Great*, White, Triple One

The Britons had their Dôn, the Goidels their Danu and her children, the Tuatha Dé Danann. But who built Stonehenge around 1800 BC, over two thousand—

centuries before King Arthur? Who built the stone structures of Brugh na Boinne, or New Grange, in Ireland, and for whom, at a time when not a single pyramid had yet been erected in Egypt?

It was not the Celts – their expansion into the British Isles did not begin until around the 6th century BC. So were these structures the work of the Iberians? Or perhaps of an unknown, ancient – who knows, perhaps truly indigenous – population of the island? And for whom, and for what purpose, were they built? Neither Däniken nor the theories about 'calendars', 'astronomical observatories' or 'signals for aliens' convince me. Monuments similar to Stonehenge could have signified only one thing – worship. They were built for the gods.

There are many gods, and they have many names. But there is only one Goddess. She whose images were carved on cave walls, whose figurines were sculpted from mammoth tusks not two thousand, but twenty-five thousand years before the birth of Christ. She who is the Triple Goddess – the Virgin, the Pregnant Mother and the Crone-Death. She who emerged from Chaos before Time itself came into being. She who separated the Waters from the Heavens and danced upon them, and from her skirts the wind was born – and the world began to breathe... The Giver of life and she who takes life away – so that it may be reborn. The Great White Goddess, who was later given many names: Mut, Anat, Ishtar, Tiamat, Astarte, Inanna, Cybele, Isis, Siakti, Gaia, Artemis, Terra Mater, Bona Dea, Minerva, Diana, Lilith, Danu, Dôn, Arduina, Epona, Ceridwen, Arianrod, Morrigan... She of whom Mary of Magdala was a priestess, later known as Magdalene... She for whom people danced before bulls in Crete, for whom menhirs and cromlechs were erected... For whom Stonehenge, Avebury and the Brugh tumuli on the Boyne were built. She whom the Celts worshipped in the form of matron deities. She whose image appeared on Arthur's shield at the Battle of Badon...

She who was, is, and will be.

In **The Mists of Avalon**, the cult of the Great Goddess forms the centrepiece of pre-Christian and early Christian culture in Britain – and this fact, in itself, dispels...

the mists shrouding the Arthurian myth. Anyone interested in the legend of Arthur cannot afford the luxury of ignoring this book. Marion Zimmer Bradley has woven the cult of the Great Triple together with the legend—with Arthur, Excalibur, the Grail, the figure of Merlin-Taliesin, and the characters of Vivien and Morgaine—with remarkable skill; she has presented the conflict between the Old (the Great Mother) and the New (Christianity with its monopoly on truth) in a highly convincing manner. The success of the book – apart from Ms Bradley's undoubted talent – was due to… something else. That 'something' was her excellent and profound knowledge of the cult… which still exists today.

Unfortunately, the Polish edition *of *The Mists of Avalon** omits the author's foreword, in which Marion Zimmer Bradley expresses her gratitude to certain individuals and cites the sources from which she drew her inspiration. These individuals are the theorists, ideologists and leaders of the modern followers of the Great Goddess, united within the neo-Celtic and neo-Druidic (and highly feminist) movement known as Wicca.

Firstly: Gerald Brosseau Gardner, the de facto founder and leading theorist of the Wicca movement. Secondly: Margaret Murray, a British anthropologist and author of **The Witch Cult in Western Europe** (1921) and **The God of the Witches** (1931). By arguing that what we know as 'witchcraft' and 'witches' sabbats' was in fact a continuation of ancient religious rites dating back to the deep Palaeolithic era in honour of the Great Goddess, Murray became, alongside Gardner, the second ideologue of Wicca. Thirdly: Starhawk, a writer and author of **The Spiral Dance**. Fourthly: Alison Harlow, a Wiccan priestess from the *Covenant of the Goddess*.

It is worth noting that another well-known *fantasy* author, Diana Paxson, is also associated with the Wiccan movement, and books by Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin and other prominent figures of the genre can always be found in Wiccan bookshops.

The Wiccan movement can, of course, be regarded as a bit of a quirk – because it is, in a way, a bit of a quirk. But the fact that the cult of the Great White Goddess is the oldest known to humankind cannot be denied. Anyone who wishes to may read Graves' **The White Goddess** *. I shall say no more.

Well, perhaps just one more thing: the basic ritual objects of the Wiccans, without which no Wiccan mystery rite in honour of the Great Triple cannot take place, are the chalice and the sword.

The Grail and Excalibur.

The rest is silence.

Who's Who
or who is who (or what)
in Arthurian legend

A few of the characters, objects, places and names that appear in the legend deserve a few words of explanation. Not because I suspect anyone of being unfamiliar with a particular name or term – quite the opposite. There are simply too many of these names and terms.

Malory, in particular, by compiling – to the point of (and sometimes beyond) redundancy – all the versions and adaptations of the legend known and available to him, brought about a remarkable proliferation of certain names and characters. Errors in subsequent transcriptions and language versions have caused terrible confusion. The Welsh language – the source language of the myth – is not an easy one, either in terms of spelling or phonetics. Hence, the Welsh originals have survived to the present day in a form that has been severely distorted by successive transcribers.

In addition to these distortions, this 'miraculous proliferation' took place. The prototypes for many of the characters in the legendary drama were, quite obviously, the gods of the Welsh pantheon and Celtic heroes. Some of these gods and heroes gave rise to a whole series of characters in subsequent adaptations.

The ruler of the Land of Wonder, Pwyll, for example, became Pelles, Pellean, Pellam, Pelleas and, finally, Pellinor. The god Gwyn, son of Nudd, became Sir Gwinas, Guynas and Gwenbau. The Cornish equivalent—